Blueprint for Change

Tab 3

Information Technology Team Report

Implementation Plan for Reengineering Claims Processing

June 1997

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In order for the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to become an organization which provides world class service, we must deliver service at least as well as service providers in the private sector. Comparisons with ourselves in the past must give way to comparisons to contemporary service providers who deliver benefits and services in minutes and days, not weeks and months. Reengineering VBA to provide this level of service will require us to effectively use information technology and telecommunication tools in an organized, thoughtful and effective way. The IT solutions must be in support of a future vision that processes work in a totally different way. The vision must come first, but the information technology solutions are the backbone of the vision.

VBA's vision of claims processing in 2002 is fundamentally different from claims processing today. The process is oriented toward a very rich and productive initial contact with customers and seeks to intake as much data as needed early in the process. The vision of 2002 emphasizes data movement rather than paper and claims folder movement. Where possible, data will be obtained via electronic interfaces. VBA will deliver services through an aggressive emphasis on partnership and trust with claimants and their representatives. The movement of data rather than paper will dramatically reduce delays in queue times and eliminate many of the hand-offs associated with today's process. Rule based technology and an efficient case management application will be the centerpiece for the IT solution. This centerpiece will enable the end user to link to the systems needed to process and complete the claim. Because the data can be accessed by many users, accurate information will be available at any point in the process.

The source of the information with which to populate the data in the system will change. Rather than paper applications mailed, information will be taken via efficient telecommunication systems and the Internet while leaving open the traditional modes of personal contact and mail for those veterans more comfortable with these means. Access to the system will be available for claimants through a computer or telephone. Veteran Service Officers will have the same access should customers prefer to seek their assistance in filing claims or determining the status of prior applications.

The telecommunication systems must provide customers with a wide range of services but must always give the client the choice of speaking with a Veterans Services Representative. Many calls will be handled by Telephone Information Centers (IC) staffed by employees who have access to the data regarding claims. The key components of the Telecommunications Model will be the FTS 2000 Network, Automated Response System (ARS), Information Centers and Regional Offices (RO). The careful blending of these components will result in timely, personal contacts with claimants, minimum blocked calls, and 24 hour coverage.

Though of less immediate impact on a specific claimant's request for services, just as important will be the conversion to a state of the art relational data base in the new corporate structure. The new Veterans Service Network (VETSNET) processing systems will enable VBA, for the first time, to do sophisticated data warehousing and data mining to better understand who our customers are, what their needs are and why some are not successful in their claims. Such

information will better enable VBA to meet veteran needs and make available the kind of data which is essential for both operational decision making and strategic planning.

To achieve the service goals of 2002, VA must effectively link applications that have needed functionality in a seamless manner. No one system can be developed rapidly enough to provide the functionality needed for the vision. VETSNET must be allowed to replace the current Benefits Delivery Network (BDN). Current systems such as Rating Board Automation (RBA), Claims Processing System (CPS), Control of Veterans Records System (COVERS), Intranet, and Automated Reference Materials System (ARMS) must be woven into a seamless tapestry to allow VA staff, representatives and claimants to maneuver through the significant complexity of VA law and procedure in a transparent and understandable manner.

Many of the applications of today have some of the needed functionality, but will require modifications to either exhibit additional needed functions or to effectively interface with the next component. These modifications will provide short term IT solutions that can be used by business users. However, long term solutions will require applications that conform to standard conventions and common interfaces linked to a single corporate data base. This concept will allow development to be conducted on many components in relative isolation, yet be assured that the components will seamlessly interface and share the same data. It will allow for components to be developed in different time frames and at different locations. Finally, it will allow the system to operate without all enhancements being available at the same time. A Board composed of business users, IT support personnel, and representatives from Service Organizations should be formed to assure compliance with the standards and to coordinate the development efforts at centralized as well as field locations. Compliance will allow many interested groups to participate in the development of IT solutions, but avoid the stove pipe nature of our past applications and the myriad of non-linked data bases.

This document provides the functional requirements needed to attain the vision of 2002, the gaps in our current systems and a cost/timeline for making the needed changes.

1. Introduction

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is making Business Process Reengineering (BPR) the primary tool for bringing about dramatic improvements in contemporary measures of performance in the face of declining resources. BPR assumptions will drive portions of the VBA budget. Given the skepticism by some regarding VBA's ability to deliver dramatic service improvements it is critical that this effort be successful. A recent study showed that many reengineering efforts fail, primarily due to problems with the computer systems used to implement the new processes. For this reason, the information technology and telecommunications portion of the process must be carefully developed and must fully support the new work design.

While the focus of this document is information technology, we believe that new technology in the absence of radical work redesign will render the software solutions ineffective. The BPR vision for future claims processing is such a radical change. For example, there is no real reason why spouse's death pension cannot now, in most cases, be processed in minutes, by

phone call, with the existing systems. Service Medical Records are not always needed. Data already available in existing systems can and should be used. A claim can actually be processed in minutes, instead it is a struggle to reach timeliness goals of sixty plus days. Requirements that a signed application be of record prior to taking the first step must be changed. There must be a willingness by VBA to truly embrace BPR and make dynamic process improvements to bring this organization in line with the private sector. Paperless intake process will require that the public either have individual ability and access to interact electronically or they individually will have to seek information and present claims and inquiries through an "agent", i.e. either a direct contact VA employee, or a non-VA representative with the ability and access - the Veterans Service Organization. This systematic commitment to developing the substantial benefits offered by a paperless environment carries with it stringent obligations to provide both readily available electronic access and full partnership service organization relationships. Both of these obligations are addressed in this action plan.

At the onset it is critical to point out that the IT vision of the future is being developed by looking forward to the dramatic changes that are taking place in the service sector, primarily in private business, in order to mold the vision. The reason for this is that the VBA's performance is compared to services and methods that are available daily to our clients using private sector providers. Put another way, it matters little to the public that we may have reduced the time it takes to receive benefits from two hundred days to one hundred days when the same person can pick up the telephone and have several hundred thousand dollars available to purchase a home in less than ten minutes. Likewise, it matters little that the process of adding a dependent to a compensation award has been reduced to twenty-five days, when the same person can have dependents, automobiles, and houses added to his or her insurance in a matter of minutes with a phone call or E-mail message. These other organizations are neither taking greater risks compared to the days when they delivered service as we now do nor are they providing these dramatic improvements for just improved profit. In fact, they are doing this to survive in the Service Age where many products are indistinguishable except for the service aspect. The dramatic improvements in interfaces have allowed credit reports and other documents to be available almost instantly. The improvements in telecommunications that have resulted in marrying the computer with powerful telephone switches have resulted in much more personalized service and greatly improved access. VBA's success in matching this level of service will allow the BPR effort to match and exceed the performance of other service providers.

This document is focused on technological tools that can radically improve the processing of compensation and pension claims. However, it is important to emphasize that the building blocks outlined are equally applicable to other segments of our services such as Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling and loan guaranty claims processing. Certain concepts, such as the Corporate Data Base, will make inclusion of additional services much easier and will allow for improved service delivery, primarily through efficient data sharing.

VBA's telecommunications strategy must change not only to support the redesigned work process but also to resolve a long-standing blocked call problem, achieving both with fewer FTE. While new telecommunications technologies and reorganization of how we provide telephone

service will help us meet this goal, an underlying principle that must guide VBA as we implement telecommunications change, is that new technology should result in improved service.

BPR calls for more frequent, personal, and proactive contact among VBA, veterans, and veterans service organizations. Also, in customer surveys, veterans have told us that they want to be able to deal with one person, preferably the one who handles his or her claim. This emphasis on VA initiated customer contact at all phases of the claims process will require telecommunications support at all processing sites. However, resolution of the blocked call problem and telecommunications support for other VA business lines will require use of automated telephone technologies and the adoption of a national strategy to route calls where they can be answered. In implementing changes to telecommunication services to support both BPR and the resolution of the blocked call problem, VBA must coordinate telecommunication strategy with claims process redesign and IT improvements, using improved service to our customers as the compass for directing the course of change.

2. Vision of Claims Processing

The claims process in the year 2002 will be fundamentally different than it is today. Today our system emphasizes the "back end" of the system. Our front end work is often paper intensive and done in preparation for a future action (e.g., disability rating, award, etc.). The 2002 model will be highly front end oriented. Rule based technology and case management are essential elements to the new VBA claims processing system. Access to VBA will be heavily oriented toward telecommunications or other electronic mediums. The use of paper applications have been discarded by many in the insurance and mortgage banking business by the year 1996. If VBA continues in the current mind set regarding paper applications, BPR will have, at best, limited success. The need for front end emphasis and the use of paperless intake systems is a critical building block for the IT solution for four reasons.

- No major organization has gone to a paperless system by trying to convert all of their existing records to electronic records. They have done it by cutting over to a system that loads current records into data fields and retrieves the existing records only when needed. In short, the front end IT solution will lead to a paperless system.

- Dramatic reductions in queue time delays cannot be achieved with paper work processes.

- Electronic interfaces with a paper system makes little sense from a service improvement perspective.

- Effective case management requires immediate availability of data when the system is accessed by the public.

VBA is currently building an information system in VETSNET and CPS that allows for the needed front end service emphasis. In order to compete with the service industry, we must have an information system by the year 2002 that allows for seamless electronic transfer of case specific data to decision makers and integrates additional interfaced information will little human

intervention. The concept of non-value added actions (e.g., re-keying data from a prior step) will not be needed even given the fact that VBA must continue to use systems that will support very large databases. How the system architecture can be designed to provide these dramatic service improvements will be discussed shortly. However, it is important to provide a clear vision of how claims will be processed in the year 2002 and the type of IT support that will be needed.

Claims will be received from a variety of access points to the traditional ones of mail and personal contact but with an increasing trend toward electronic means. Many of these contacts will involve interactions with a highly trained Veterans Service Representative (VSR). The VSR is both a decision maker and a case manager. The VSR will be an integral part of the vision of case management. Case management incorporates both the person and the system that support the process. The electronic tools available to the VSR in this process will be many. The use of standard published interfaces will allow rapid assembly of newly developed components. In addition, external interfaces will allow significantly more final actions to be taken on the initial contact (e.g., adding dependents, changing income, etc.). Further, the VSR's authority to make and explain decisions will eliminate many of the current claims that do not result in favorable outcomes (non-well grounded) and significantly slow our processes. Actions that are outside of the authority for final disposition by the VSR (e.g., disability rating decisions) will be developed, primarily via electronic interfaces with the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), private facilities, and other agencies. Once actions have been initiated, the case will be placed in electronic queue for the Rating Veterans Service Representative (RVSR). All actions will be recorded electronically and available for use should the client need to know the status of the case. The telecommunication system will identify the client to automatically bring the record to the VSR should future contacts be made. The client will always be given choices, but the IT system will provide the data to all VSR's making it generally unnecessary for the client to speak to the same person on each contact. Exceptions may be when dealing directly with the RVSR or the Decision Review Officer. In these cases, the need to quickly resolve issues in complex cases may result in the client dealing directly with the same person.

To meet these needs VBA will deploy VETSNET, a database platform that combines the need to work with a single, corporate data base that is used at various logical levels. The business applications reside at appropriate levels, many distributed closer to the client machine, but all connected with clean interfaces and many linked with network interfaces. The use of standard published interfaces allows development of new business solutions to be done at the most appropriate site and level with the assurance that newly developed components will engage the existing systems seamlessly.

The architecture described above will virtually eliminate the need for additional processing action after final decisions by the RVSR. Since we are moving data, which can be decomposed and reassembled in any display needed, the input items of the decision will also be elements to pay benefits and notify clients of the outcome. The data will be available for post decision reviews and appealed actions. The conformity of distributed applications with the guidelines of the Enterprise Data Model as the corporate data base allows for payment data to update the Benefit Delivery System. While data is constantly being extracted from the Master Data Base for use by the distributed applications, only data needed for permanent storage is returned as updates.

Transitory data drops out after their value has been extracted. Because there will continue to be a need to store text data for legal and analytical purposes, data warehousing will be established to allow for information retrieval for the Decision Review Officers as well as the Board of Veterans Appeals and the Court of Veterans Appeals. If necessary, paper documents can be created from the warehousing queries for third party review.

3. Critical IT Components

In developing the IT Implementation Plan it became clear that three critical areas, although interrelated, were major components of the overall solution. These areas are telecommunications, electronic interfaces, and software functional requirements. While some will argue that hardware should be a major issue, the fact of the matter is that hardware and systems are the byproduct of the size and scope of your IT vision and should not, in and of themselves, drive the nature of the process. This is an important lesson for VA. While the overall vision largely drives the plan, each of these components were also developed with a vision.

3.1 Telecommunications Vision

VBA in 2002 will manage telecommunications under a national strategy that will make available a wide range of options for our customers. Veterans and their families will be able to access information about their benefits and claims through both automated options available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and by talking to a Veterans Service Representative. Most general information calls will be handled by Telephone Information Center Systems while most claim specific calls will be routed directly to VSRs responsible for handling the callers claim.

The BPR Telecommunications Model has four primary components, each with different basic functions:

1. FTS 2000 Network;
2. Automated Response System (ARS);
3. Information Centers (IC) and;
4. Regional Offices

3.2 FTS 2000 Network

The network component will be the customer's principal telephone access point for VA. Customers will access any VA service by dialing 1-800-827-1000. The network will query the corporate database, using an identifier provided by the claimant, and will route the call to the Automated Response System. The network will balance calls among the different Information Centers and ROs, directing calls to the appropriate location in the order in which they are received. The FTS 2000 network also will provide key management information reports to allow VBA to monitor network performance and demand for service.

3.3 Automated Response System

Each customer, dialing the VA toll free number, will access the ARS with an option to speak directly to a VSR at any stage in the process. The ARS is a collection of automated resources that supplements human resources to answer general customer inquiries and provide basic services. The physical ARS components do not need to be collocated with the human resources, but rather can be geographically separated. Furthermore, the physical ARS components may reside entirely at a VBA site, inside the FTS 2000 network, or some combination of both. The ARS component of this end-state vision focuses on the functions performed, independent of location.

The ARS will be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and will offer customers general Information about all VA benefits, the location, business hours, and directions to each of our ROs. Customers seeking forms or printed information about VA benefits can have the information faxed directly to them or they can leave their name and address for VBA to mail the information.

Callers will be prompted for their unique identifier such as Social Security number and VA assigned personal identification number (PIN) in order for the ARS to provide access to a range of personal account information for our customers, the status of claims, and the ability to initiate business transactions, consistent with VBA's redesigned workflow. Customers within our case management program will be able to be connected to their Veterans Service Representative (VSR) through the ARS. In cases where the customer does not have a case manager, the customer will always have the option of being connected to a VSR during extended VBA business hours. The ARS will provide VBA with the ability to sort and prioritize calls based on who the caller is and the type of service required. Finally, the ARS will provide management information reports to allow VBA to monitor usage of the various ARS services and ensure that the most useful and popular services are the most easily available.

3.4 Information Center

The Information Center (IC) will serve as the principal electronic access point to VBA information and services in the future. Callers with pending actions will automatically be switched to their case managers. Recorded information will be available. Customers without case managers choosing to speak with someone will be connected to a highly trained VSR who will be equipped with the technology necessary to provide world class customer service to callers. Ultimately, the customer will receive a personalized greeting because identifying information entered into the ARS by the customer will automatically link to the VBA corporate database and "pop-up" the customer's record on the screen of the VBA counselor when the call is connected. This will not only provide a high degree of personalized service but also speed resolution of the call.

Callers will receive personalized assistance from VSRs and will be able to determine the status of any pending action and conduct a full range of transactions. In the relatively few cases

where the Information Center VSRs cannot fully address the issue, the VSR will be able to provide a "warm transfer" of the call to a benefits expert in VBA. A warm transfer is one in which the caller is told that he or she is being transferred and why he or she is being transferred. The information collected from the customer is transferred with the call so that the VBA expert will not have to ask for information again. This approach will also ensure that a customer is not transferred to wait in another call queue or dropped accidentally from the connection.

In cases where the volume of callers requesting access to VSRs requires that the call be placed in a queue, the caller will be informed of the approximate wait time and be offered access to the information in the ARS or to pre-recorded messages that publicize VA benefits, programs or activities. In any case, use of this intelligent queuing function allows the customer to make the decision about whether to wait based on the actual situation.

3.5 Regional Office

VBA Regional Offices will not be required to service the large volume of incoming calls that they service today. The VSR at the regional office will focus on calls related to claims located at the RO. This will ensure that the maximum amount of resources can be dedicated to case processing and personalized service.

To assure timely service during times of peak demand for counselor services, selected ROs will augment VSRs assigned to ICs by linking directly to the IC call queue in a backup mode and taking overflow calls. In addition, this same philosophy will allow VBA to use VSRs located away from the IC to service calls. The notion of "remote servicing" will increase VBA's options for locating staff by allowing outbased VSRs as well as, work-at-home (including the employment of the physically challenged who might be home bound), and flexible shifts.

RO VSRs will be able to call customers using an advanced automated out-dialing system to provide the status of a claim directly to a customer rather than waiting for the customer to call VBA. This service will allow VSRs to queue multiple outgoing calls to automatically call our customers at a time that is most convenient for them and at a time when the VSR is available to take the call. This technology will help avoid "telephone tag" scenarios. Out-dialing could also be used for outreach to selected populations (e.g., women veterans) either by RO or IC staff.

Overflow blocked calls may be routed to VSRs throughout the system to assure timely service during peak call demand times. During these times, selected ROs will assign VSRs to the IC call queue as a backup to handle overflow calls. In addition, other VSRs not assigned to service the ICs or at remote locations, may handle overflow calls. This will increase options to locate VSRs at outbased locations and expand opportunities for work-at-home and flexible work hours.

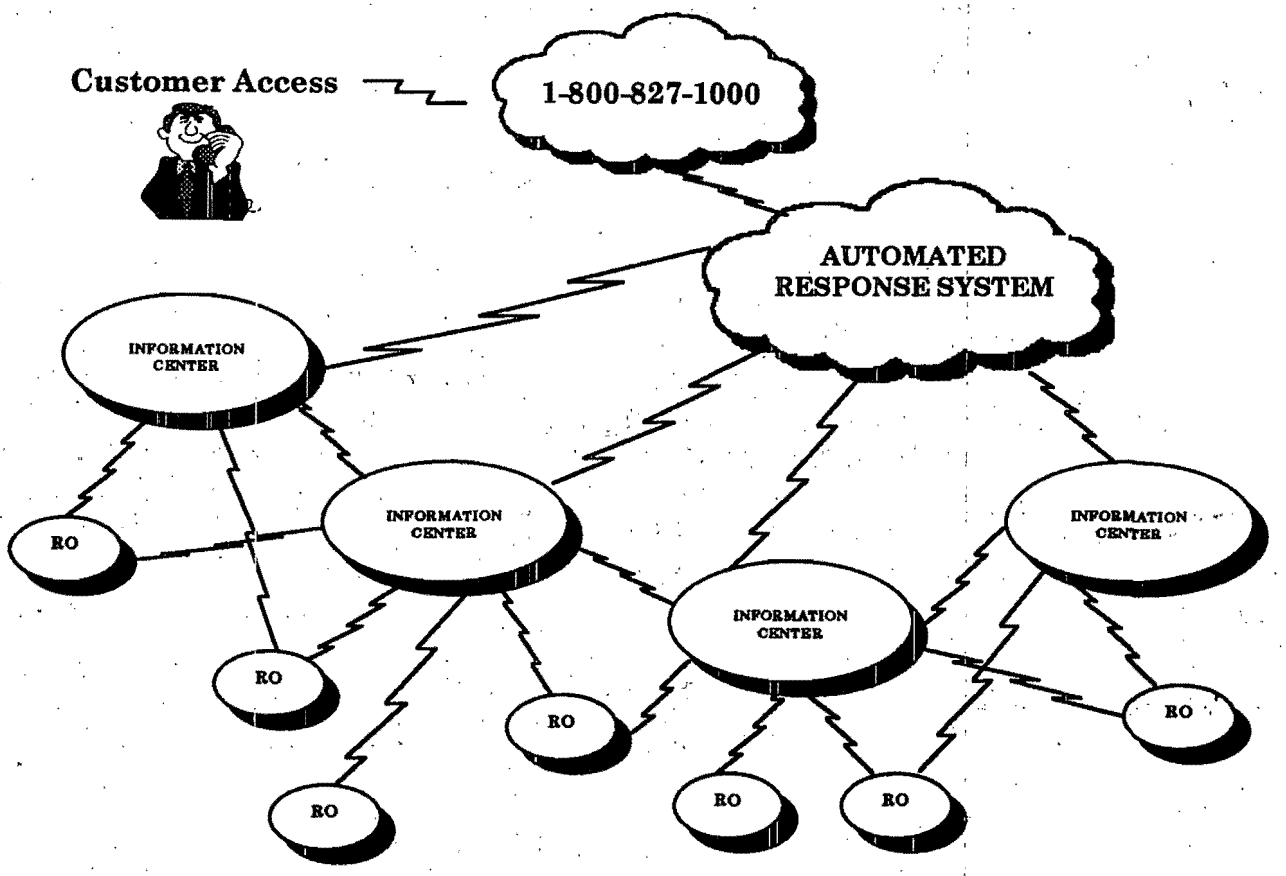

Figure 3-1: Automated Response System

3.6 Interfaces

Currently existing electronic interfaces bring us some of the decision critical information we use in the claims process, but the adequacy, reliability and timeliness of receipt of that information falls short of the principle of having the right information in the decision maker's hands at the earliest point a decision can be made. Adequate interfaces to release VA information

about a veteran in his or her behalf is virtually non-existent. The Compensation and Pension (C&P) Service vision of electronic interfaces supporting the claims process will bring complete, usable decision critical information into the process at the right time and to the right place and people to support process decisions. The support vision provides for creating new electronic interfaces for veteran/public access to provide general benefit information by Internet and with state and local agencies to provide timely and efficient release of VA information to other organizations making their own benefit/entitlement decisions for individual veterans. The vision also includes full access to our systems to meet the commitments required of electronic service organization partnerships.

3.7 Software Functionality

Our current claims processing support systems are characterized by separate, distinct systems that were developed for a particular purpose. For example, the Rating Board Automation (RBA) system provides functionality in the area of producing rating documents. It does not, however, bring forward all of the possible data from prior development, nor does it directly link to the payment of benefits. The processing of 2002 will be characterized by a smooth and seamless transition from application to application. VA's first response to the customer who wish to file a claim will not be to send them the form, but will be to begin processing the claim. Customer satisfaction will be built in from the beginning. VA will foster the spirit of inclusion by asking our partners in the Veterans Service Organizations to use our systems to initiate claims processing.

Interfaces will be used to populate needed data fields eliminating placing unneeded burdens on our claimants. Data that cannot be obtained by interfaces will be entered once. If the same data is needed for a software application further down the process, it will not have to be re-keyed. Screen scraping technology will temporarily fill these needs while more permanent solutions are developed by the VETSNET group. Ultimately, the goal of VETSNET is to provide the functionality within the broad application specifications. However, the short run solution will require a careful linkage of the existing applications, with added functionality to fill gaps needed to reach the IT needs of the vision. By linking existing (albeit modified) applications we can achieve a much higher degree of data movement and present the users with a consistent presentation from which we can move, in background, from application to application.

As Figure 3-2 depicts, there are fifty-nine action items needed to provide the necessary IT infrastructure needed for the vision. Most of these action items are already either under active development, planned or under consideration. This reality reflects the planning done in earlier business modeling exercises, the initial BPR effort and the VBA's efforts to address service delivery shortfalls. All of these items link to one or more of the five basic processes related to compensation and pension. The numbers indicate specific action items listed in both Appendix B and Appendix C. The degree to which we can effectively link these will dictate the success we can achieve in the short run. Existing applications will not provide the needed functionality. We must add some key features. For example, the ability to take electronic applications and begin claims processing by electronic contacts is critical. This building block is missing today and must be added. There are many other IT gaps that must be filled. Appendix A lists the general

requirements in each of the three broad areas of telecommunications, interfaces, and software functionality. Appendix B provides the specific implementation planning actions needed to obtain the functionality. Appendix C gives a more complete description of the action item to include a description and expected benefits.

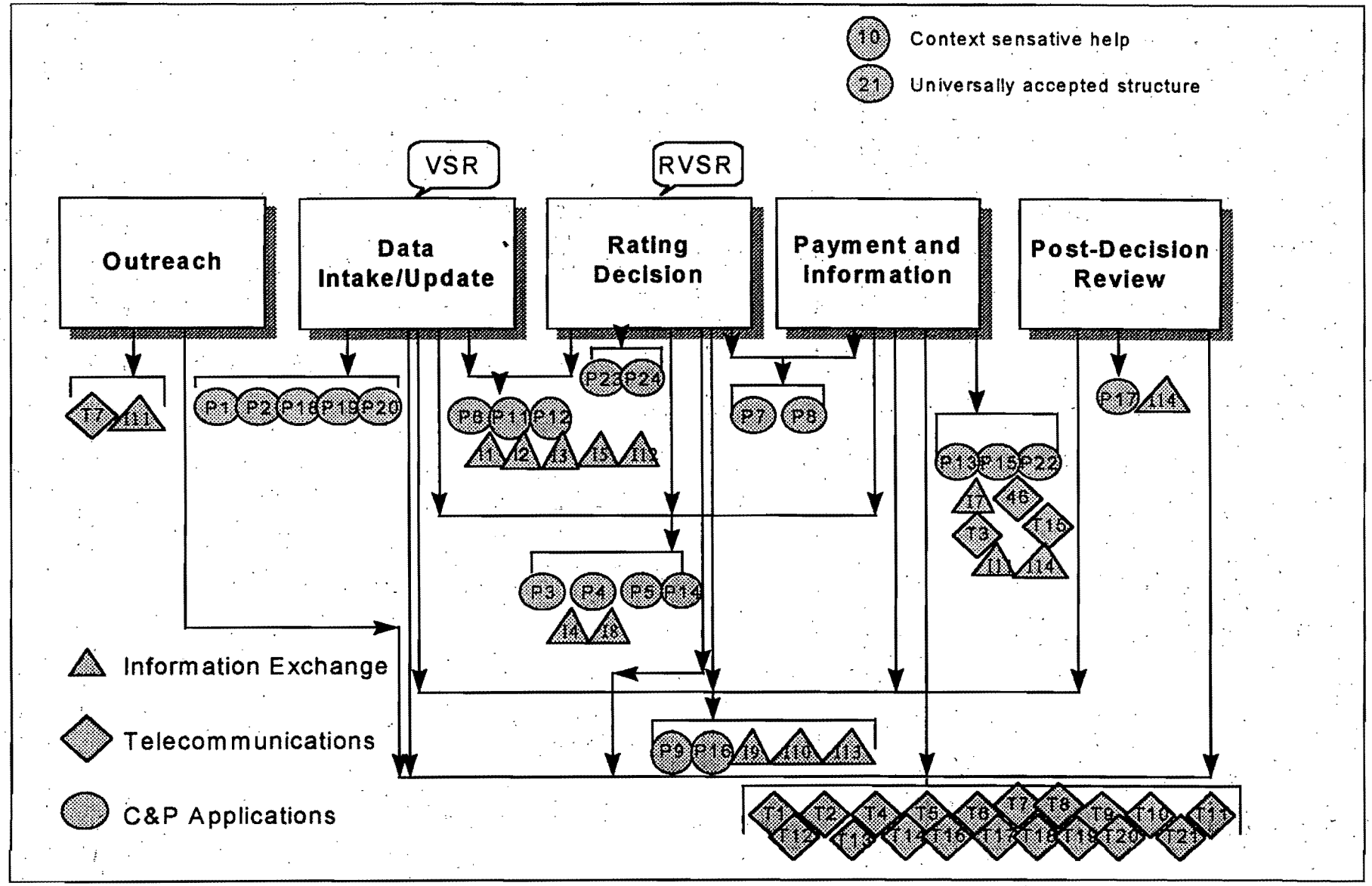

Figure 3-2: IT Action Items

4. IT Development Strategies & Associated Risks

4.1 General Comment

We have reviewed the plans and strategy of the CIO with respect to the development of VETSNET, telecommunications, the development of a modern relational data base with access to all employees throughout the country and the approach to Rapid Application Development and find that it is consistent with the needs of the C&P business line. The following discussion draws on work that the CIO and his staff have done and which we find persuasive from a business perspective.

4.2 Telecommunications Strategy & Risks

The transformation of how VBA provides access to information about VA benefits and services and claims assistance will be affected by two separate but related factors:

- Blocked calls.
- Support of the BPR redesigned C&P work process.

Blocked calls are a long-standing VBA customer service problem that must be addressed immediately while the redesigned claims process presents new telecommunications challenges. VBA decision makers will now have a personal and proactive relationship with their customers, involving personnel who have not talked to customers before, answering calls where they have not been answered before, and using communications strategies that have not been employed to any great extent before.

These issues are interrelated because the transition to the redesigned claims process will occur concurrently with VBA's efforts to adopt a national telecommunications strategy to eliminate blocked calls. Currently, all calls -- C&P claims related, calls related to other business lines and general information inquiries -- are answered in the Veterans Services Division. In the Vision state some of these calls will be handled by VSRs at claims processing locations while other calls may be answered by ARS or by IC VSRs. Both initiatives must be coordinated closely with changes in telecommunications technology, other IT roll-outs, and retraining of VBA employees.

4.3 Expected Call Volumes

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) study in 1995-96 showed that 27% of VBA telephone calls are related to C&P claims issues. Another 10% of calls were classified as "payment inquiries." While the OIG interpreted this category as check status information, many payment inquires involve claims related issues (e.g., Pension Income limitations). Consequently, many VBA customers consider payment inquiries as being claims related. Also, studies by those

ROs that route calls directly to claims processing teams showed that 42% of total calls are routed to case management teams.

Because more personalized contact with customers is a cornerstone of the redesigned claims process, all claims specific calls should be routed to the RO where the claim will be processed. However, in those cases where a claims related call may be routed to an IC, the IC VSR should handle the call. While remote VSRs at ICs or other ROs will be able to answer many claims related calls by 2002, during the initial phase of telecommunications reengineering (1998-99), approximately 40% of calls will continue to go directly to the RO of jurisdiction. Based on calendar year 1996 call volumes, this translates to **3.7 million** calls per year. Conversely, **5.5 million** calls can be handled by ICs, using both ARS and VSR response.

Since the redesigned work process will include more applications by telephone and more customer contact with claimants, claims data as well as telephone calls by area (Table 4-1) will help in forecasting anticipated call volumes.

	Calendar Year 1996 Claims/Telephone Interviews					
	Completed Supplemental	C&P Original	Claims Total	Telephone Interviews Total	Claims Related	Other
National	1,374,076	418,316	1,792,392	9,184,788	3,673,915	5,510,873
Eastern	280,001	93,285	373,286	2,047,506	819,002	1,228,504
Central	311,588	91,200	402,788	1,861,193	744,477	1,116,716
Southern	540,834	154,138	694,972	3,175,789	1,270,316	1,905,473
Western	241,653	79,683	321,336	2,100,300	840,120	1,260,180

Table 4-1: Claims/Telephone Interviews

Table 4-2 below shows relationships between telephone calls and claims. This information can be useful in developing area strategies. For example, Western Area receives a significantly higher ratio of telephone calls compared to C&P claims when compared to the Southern Area.

Ratios	Total Calls to Original Claims	Total Calls to Total Claims
National	8.7	5.12
Eastern	8.7	5.49
Central	8.2	4.62
Southern	8.2	4.57
Western	10.5	6.54

Table 4-2: Telephone Calls/Claims

4.4 ARS Projections

An Inspector General study in 1995-96 concluded that 41% of VBA calls could be handled by automated means. Given the demographics of VA's customers and the flaws in the design of the above study, the actual usage will be much lower than this. Many calls to VBA are not simply requests for information. VBA customers are often people in crisis, who are facing a serious disability or illness, loss of job, loss of home, loss of health benefits, or lack of funds to attend school. These customers require empathy, compassion, and understanding, not just information.

VBA's Insurance Service has used ARS and Interactive Voice Response (IVR) since 1995. Their experience shows that 12% of callers initially use IVR. However, only 7% use IVR exclusively (without transfer to an Insurance Specialist). Moreover, the St. Paul IC reports only 5% usage of ARS.

The experience of the Insurance Service, although more conservative, represents a good starting point in projecting the expected benefits of ARS. Once VETSNET is deployed and developed beyond its first iteration, ARS and IVR use will grow. Also, certain populations (e.g. those using education benefits may use ARS to a higher degree). The St. Louis Regional Processing Center is testing ARS/IVR technology but results are limited at this point.

Assuming a 10% **initial** use, 551,087 calls will be handled effectively by ARS. Usage of ARS/IVR could grow substantially by the year 2002 as some of the IVR functions described in the Vision become available. However, use of ARS and IVR must be the **choice** of our customers and development of ARS/IVR technology must include customer input through use of focus groups and customer satisfaction surveys. Easy availability of a VSR **must always** be part of our telecommunications strategy.

4.5 Staffing Considerations

There are significant risks in trying to shift FTE and telephone calls too quickly to ICs. Staffing will be a critical issue both in 2002 and during the intervening years. Overstaffing of IC locations may result in under-utilization of VSRs during slower periods. VBA has a fairly predictable call pattern with more calls during the first week of the month and at the beginning of the week. In planning for staffing at ICs, areas should use the minimum staffing needed for these slower periods. Calls during peak periods can be augmented by RO staff. Conversely, understaffing of ICs could result in a higher blocked call rate than ever, unless there is a heavy commitment from areas to use RO VSRs to augment IC VSRs. As ROs become immersed in the transition to the new claims process, they cannot abdicate responsibility for general phone calls, based on the premise that the "IC will handle those calls".

FTE Required by Area for IC Calls
(based on 100 calls per day/per FTE)

		Average	Average	Average		IC FTE
		Daily Calls	Claims Related Calls	IC Calls	Less ARS (-10%)	Required
M	National	36,593	14,637	21,956	19,760	198
E	Eastern	8,157	3,263	4,894	4,405	44
A	Central	7,415	2,966	4,449	4,004	40
N	Southern	12,653	5,061	7,592	6,832	68
	Western	8,368	3,347	5,021	4,519	45
H	National	48,302	19,321	28,981	26,083	261
I	Eastern	10,768	4,307	6,461	5,815	58
G	Central	9,788	3,915	5,873	5,285	53
H	Southern	16,701	6,681	10,021	9,019	90
	Western	11,045	4,418	6,627	5,965	60
	National	26,347	10,539	15,808	14,227	142
L	Eastern	5,873	2,349	3,524	3,172	32
O	Central	5,339	2,136	3,203	2,883	29
W	Southern	9,110	3,644	5,466	4,919	49
	Western	6,025	2,410	3,615	3,253	33

Table 4-3: FTE Required by Area for IC Calls

Table 4-3 provides data by area showing expected call under varying call demand scenarios. These data show that 83% more FTE are required on high volume days compared to low volume days. The high volatility of incoming telephone traffic is further complicated by the daily patterns which can vary by up to 400% during busy hours compared to slow hours.

The key to dealing with these high volumes of telephone traffic is flexibility and cooperation. Initially, many non-C&P claims related calls will be handled by RO VSRs even though the call may be processed through an Information Center. Shifting of FTE from ROs to ICs may be accomplished over time as ROs complete conversion to VSR positions, as technology such as ARS/IVR is made available, and the effects of these changes are analyzed.

Once IC technology is implemented, overflow calls at one IC can first go to other ICs and then to ROs. This strategy will make the best use of VSRs assigned to ICs. Management of this process should be at the national and area levels. Since VBA will be handling telephone calls using a national strategy, telecommunications managers can project staffing needs.

As ROs complete the transition to Customer Service Centers, calls pertaining to claims should be routed to the VSR or team handling the claim. Some ROs may be able to do this with local call handling equipment while other solutions must be found for those with older equipment.

VA must continue to develop solutions to blocked calls. In most cases this involves the rerouting of blocked calls from one RO to another or to a central point such as an Information Center. Strategies should link to the end state vision depicted in the Vision section, i.e. claims related calls will go to ROs and general calls to ICs with support from ROs. Development of a national telecommunications strategy will also need to be coordinated with other VBA business lines as well as VHA and National Cemetery System (NCS).

4.6 Transition Timing

To achieve the long-term vision of implementing a national telephone system as outlined in the Vision, VBA Telecommunication Service must develop a detailed plan for replacement of local telecommunications equipment with a telecommunications architecture which allows VBA to route customer inquires to the location where they can receive quick, accurate and complete answers to questions and problems with the first call.

To achieve this vision VBA must determine locations to place telecommunications technology. Initially, Information Centers selected will principally be locations for technology to implement this vision. Ideally, these locations will be collocated at existing RO sites. It is at these ICs that the Automated Response systems will be located. Human VSR support for ICs will be also located at the IC but will need to be supplemented by VSR support from affiliated ROs. The following guidelines are offered to reach the end state:

General inquiry calls may be handled by a combination of ARS, IC VSRs and RO VSRs. The percentage of calls handled by ARS will be determined by the effectiveness of these technologies to provide world class service. We expect that use of ARS will expand over time as technology improves at one location may result in poor productivity during slack periods. Dispersion of VSR support at ROs will provide areas with more flexibility in using VSRs during low call periods. Finally, the mix of IC and RO VSR's will not be static. VBA anticipates that greater call volumes of claims related issues will be able to be handled at remote locations once VETSNET, CPS and other supporting technologies are available.

4.7 Software Development Strategies & Risks

VBA has moved to a more dynamic software development environment which is distinctly different from past practices. This has been driven by the recognition that business needs drive development and business sponsors are deeply involved in the process. We must think in terms of which piece of the solution is being solved by specific projects and work toward linking these parts in a manner that is largely invisible to the end user. Some of the current efforts must continue with no additional mandates if they are to solve short term needs. For example, the VETSNET system must complete the replacement of the current BDN system in order to create a high level data system that is compliant with the requirements of the corporate data model.

However, additional functionality is required. VETSNET will not be in a position to address these additional needs until after the delivery of the BDN replacement.

The solution to having the IT functional requirements in place by 2002 lies both in system design as well as in software integration. We must work from two fundamental assumptions. First, regardless of who develops IT business solutions, or where they are developed, they must comply with standard interfaces and use data fields that are compliant with the corporate data model. This will allow more components to become available since builders will worry less about interface and memory issues and will concentrate on solving the business problems. Further, this concept will allow the assembly of business solutions using both commercial as well as custom-developed components. Second, in order to meet a 2002 timeline, there is a need to develop parts of the IT solution in parallel. Clearly, the need to replace the existing BDN with VETSNET is a high priority. However, the replacement of the BDN and the use of a universal data base is a high level data-service tier that houses the data needed to make decisions. As a result, efforts aimed at creating IT solutions for the problems related to decisions, business rules, and information processing can be simultaneously developed at business-service or user-service tiers. The key to allowing the simultaneous solution of these IT issues revolves, again, around using a common corporate data base and applications at all tiers adhering to standards that allow for seamless integration.

The IT effort should be a shared effort between the IRM, the business line services, and field offices. We believe that the business users of the systems are a critical piece of the solution. If we want user commitment and ownership of our IT solutions for 2002 then we must have a high degree of user involvement. Also, it is critical that business solution applications be developed, tested, and deployed much more quickly than in the past. The criticism VA has felt by the GAO and others has often been aimed at our software maturity and the inability to create timely solutions that deal with today's business needs. In addition to developing new applications faster, we must be prepared to modify applications currently in development to fit with new business models.

The three guiding principles should be:

1. Our business systems must be developed quickly.

2. We must use our IT resources at various levels and not attempt to create inflexible "empires" associated with the bureaucracy of the past.

3. In order to accomplish the two items above, we must have a three tiered system with invisible connectivity between them.

The reality of pressing business needs do not allow us the luxury of entertaining "visions of grandeur" where one great IT solution will envelope or replace the patchwork of applications we now have. Applications such as CPS must be made spokes of business process solutions that link to other applications and information sources. Whether the business process solutions run on local servers or sequent systems will depend upon the size of the data base and the permanency of

the data created as well as the need for access. With access a high priority, most databases must reside in systems that can be accessed from remote locations.

In order to coordinate and integrate the efforts of the various groups, working at various levels, we support the CIO's efforts to create a coordinating body. The members, and the represented groups, are critical, as is the mission. We believe the following characteristics should be an important part of membership:

1. Since the process of 2002 IT development will take place at three levels, members representing each of the levels must participate; Business line managers representing the user level, and VETSNET and 20S representatives at levels 1 and 2.

2. The board must not exercise line authority over any sub-group, but must serve to develop standards for application development tools as well as make sure system components are compliant with the IT platforms.

3. The board would serve to coordinate rapid application development (RAD) efforts at field sites to make sure needed business applications are developed by the most appropriate group. This will result in application development time-frames that are the shortest and applications are developed with the most efficient use of resources.

4. The board would develop a performance measurement system that would provide guidelines for all applications in assessing the degree to which the application addresses current business need gaps and improves our services.

5. IT Infrastructure Vision

Once we all agree that the concept of an corporate data base is essential, the hardware on which the operating system resides should be scaleable in nature. That is, the hardware grows as the database and application grow. By using a cluster, we can manage as a single system but avoid the cost of prohibitively expensive hardware.

The design of the system architecture must provide for certain definable objectives.

- Support our current systems since they must serve us in the short run
- Distribute the functionality to the end user
- Exhibit flexibility for future needs and long term applications

It is important that the infrastructure not just be viewed from the VBA perspective. Our systems of the future will require clean interfaces with VHA as well as with other Government Agencies. In addition, our systems must support veteran and Veteran Service Officers (VSO) access as well as access from outbased locations.

6. Software Integration

The issue of software integration is a very important one and is equally critical to the 2002 vision as the three tier architecture and the concept of the IT Coordination Board. The 2002 systems must have the:

1. Ability to access database information via the Internet
2. Ability to use Telephone Application Interfaces seamlessly to our databases
3. Ability to remotely maintain our databases
4. Ability to seamlessly integrate with our mail system
5. Ability to replicate data to our corporate database system after the claim has been processed; and
6. Seamless access and movement of data from application to application as we process actions.

Application development for the 2002 vision must take place in two phases, a short term (transition) and a long term. The reason for this distinction is based on two facts. First, application planning and costing must take place well in advance making short term time frames difficult. Second, the critical need to replace the BDN and address year 2000 issues will relegate major new application initiatives to the out years.

6.1 Short Term (Transitions Solutions)

There are two groups of transition recommendations. The first group relates to a more efficient linkage of existing applications. An example of this would be the recommendation to use emulation software to migrate RBA data directly to BDN fields and eliminate the double keying of rating data to the BDN (Appendix C, Action Item P8). This will not require BDN changes, but will result in efficiencies. With the power available in the client server environment, the rapid linkage to applications (and the needed data transfers) can be made invisible to the user and will allow us to use very user-friendly presentations without having to reprogram all of our applications. For ease of use, it may advisable to have a core application from which we can "launch" seamlessly to the modified current applications or new applications. This core application can serve as a "hub" from which we link the various user tools. CPS is a front end intensive program that could be used as a hub. From this, or similar programs, employees could launch to Automated Medical Information Exchange (AMIE) interfaces and other development interfaces.

The second group of transition recommendations relate to the need for VSRs to have case specific information available in order to respond to calls. It is clear that the information must be

available electronically. It is important that VBA adopt a standardized case management tool that contains the following functionality.

- Case specific information regarding development action
- Information regarding received vs. outstanding evidence
- A record of prior contacts and information regarding the contacts

Given the vision to have applications taken by telephone and Internet we must have a core program that will facilitate the flow of work in an electronic environment. In the short run, existing software can be modified to provide this functionality (Appendix C, Action Item P18). We have provided an appendix that lists the functional needs filled by current applications and have attempted to list the gaps that must be filled to comply with the 2002 visions.

6.2 Long Term Solutions

For the long run, the VETSNET Team is working to create a software system that will have all the functionality needed to support the 2002 vision, including case management. While the concept of paperless applications can be tested with modified existing software, the long term goal of moving toward a paperless claim processing system will take major hardware and software changes. Issues such as electronic warehousing must be addressed (Appendix C, Action Item P22) as well as electronic filing from remote sites (Appendix C, Action Item P20). Effective interfaces that link to automated award processing are not impossible; however, they require planning, effort, and funding. Appendix C, Action items P13 and P22 relate to the issue of automated adjustments. Sophisticated help features (Appendix C, Action Item P10), and more rule-based rating systems (Appendix C, Action Item P23) can be powerful tools to assist VSRs and RVSRs. However, we must be clear that these cannot be delivered in a short time frame. After the existing BDN has been replaced (VETSNET I), we will have the platform upon which to build these significant enhancements.

7. Software Evaluation

In the process of defining the end state vision, as well as looking at the long term and short term strategies and risks, it becomes clear that some of the software functionality in all three IT areas (telecommunications, interfaces, and process functions) exist in current or developing applications. However, it is equally clear that gaps exist. The major goal for the IT/Telecommunication Team was to develop and execute a systematic method for identifying where the applications fit and where there were gaps. Afterward, an estimated date for the action was developed. Accurate costing of these initiatives is impossible without a project plan. Initial estimates were made, however, and are included in Appendix C.

Starting from the vision, broad functional requirements were developed for the three IT pieces. These are listed in Appendix A. After the development of these requirements, a review of the existing and planned software applications was conducted. This analysis was to compare

these business solutions to the needed functions and identify the fits and gaps. The results of this Function to System Gap Analysis are summarized in Appendix B.

From the Function to System Gap Analysis a list of 59 action items was developed. These action items are needed to bring the telecommunication, interfaces, and processing software into conformity with the needs of the 2002 visions. These action items are summarized in Appendix B-2. Some of these action items have been referred to earlier in the text. The specific action items link back to the broad functional requirements in Appendix A and are cross-referenced in that appendix by number.

Appendix C is a complete listing of the 59 action items with a brief description, responsible group(s), estimated completion date, estimated cost, and benefits to be derived. The estimated completion dates are, at this point, refined only to a year. Further refinement of beginning and completion dates will require further review by the responsible groups.

8. Conclusion

We have reviewed the plans and strategy of the CIO with respect to the development of VETSNET, telecommunications, the development of a modern relational data base with access to all employees throughout the country and the approach to Rapid Application Development and find that they are consistent with the needs of the C&P business line. We strongly endorse it and urge that the VBA and the Department resist in the strongest possible ways any efforts to discontinue the development of VETSNET and the substitution of marginal enhancements to the current BDN. The BDN has consistently shown over the last several years that it is not a suitable tool to provide the kind of customer service delivery nor the data needs required by the Department to achieve the vision for claims processing which we contemplate.

The vision of 2002 outlined in the beginning pages of this document is refined first to broad functions and finally to specific action steps, dates, and costs. The vision must be reached by a collective effort and not by the incremental efforts of one group. The component developed by any particular group will largely be based upon where the business knowledge and skills exist. By adhering to standard conventions and interfaces many individuals and groups can proudly be a part of the new vision for VA.

Appendix A. Functional Requirements

To a large degree, the functional requirements are a logical byproduct of the vision. Clearly, if we are to be processing claims via electronic communications by 2002 we must carefully evaluate the gaps in the proposed software solutions currently being used and in development. Again, we can look at the three components of the IT solution.

Functional Requirements □ Telephone Subgroup

1. Develop information centers to manage national call volume and eliminate blocked calls (Action Items T41, T42, T44, T45, T46, T47, T48, T49, T50, T54, T61).

2. Develop ARSs that will allow callers to access VA services without human intervention, 7 days per week, 24 hours, per day. Options will be available in English and Spanish (Action Items T51, T52, T53, T59).

3. Develop queuing and routing system to distribute calls among information centers and ROs (Action Items T41, T42, T44, T45, T54).

4. Integrate telephone technology with corporate database so that VSRs have automated access to callers' records (Action Items T43, T44, T45, T55, T56, T57, T58, T60).

5. Provide call monitoring capability and management reports for monitoring system performance and service demand (Action Items T41, T42, T54).

Appendix B. Interface Functional Requirements

The design of the work flow of the claims process dictates the need for specific decision critical information from non-VBA sources and specifies the point in the claims process (the user and the timing) where that information is required. The need for efficiency, accuracy and timeliness in each data gathering process dictates the use of electronic technology as the exchange medium.

External interface functional requirements:

1. Current interfaces or matching programs need to be continued (I1, I3, I7)

2. Interface agreements should focus on the quality and utility value of the information we seek (I2, I3)

3. On-line access or information on demand applications for each of those interfaces should be provided (I1, I2, I3, I4, I5, I8 I2)

4. Interface agreements should also incorporate the principals of automatic notification to the VA when relevant information enters the external organizations data base (I2, I3, I4, I5)

5. Partnerships with co-located veterans representatives will require full direct access for those organizations to the systems application for submitting and developing claims (I9)

6. Full Service Organization partnerships and commitments to outbased VA employees for veterans access require full external interface access to applications for submitting and developing claims that are provided to in-house employees and co-located partners (I9, I10, I12, I13)

7. New external interfaces are necessary to minimize the resource demands of providing the customer service of releasing VA information in the veterans or beneficiaries behalf (I7, I8, I14)

8. New external interfaces, for example Internet access, to the VA are required to supplement outreach efforts and distribution of general department, agency and benefit information (I1, I11, I12, I14)

9. New external interfaces to VBA systems for the National Cemetery (NCS) System are required to support initiative for NCS processing of burial benefits and payments (I6)

Work Process Software Functional Requirements

1. Offer a paperless claims processing system (action tracking numbers P1, P3, P18, & P19)

2. Allow for immediate decisions on many issued via electronic contact (action tracking numbers P22, & P23.)

3. Allow for Veteran Service Officer claim intake (action tracking numbers P1, P2, & P20.)

4. Establish a consistent user presentation that allows for seamless access to support programs/systems. (This should be considered a common property when designing solutions and incorporated as soon as possible and be an objective of every initiative.)

5. Offer access to needed data with efficient migration of the data to the case management system and allow for electronic access to archived data (action tracking numbers P4, P5, P9, P12, P14, P16, P17, & P20.)

6. Hand off data from system to system without the need to re-key (action tracking numbers P7, P8, P12, P13, & P20.)

7. Eliminate inefficiencies between systems (e.g. RBA results in payment, batch process of C&P exams without manual input, etc.) (action tracking numbers P3, P6, P7, P8, P13, P17, P20, P21, & P24.)

8. Create IT solutions that result in consistent and complete development at the earliest point in the claims process (action tracking numbers P2, P10, P11, & P12.)

9. Develop IT tools to generate standard reports as a natural by-product of the process and generate ad hoc reports on request (actions tracking number P15)

APPENDIX C. DESCRIPTION OF ACTION ITEMS

Action Item Number P1

Title: Electronic Data Entry

Description: There is currently no way an original or subsequent claim can be received electronically. CPS has the capability of receiving data electronically, but it does not establish a master record or update it. VETSNET will have the capability to establish a record in the corporate database or update it Therefore, the functionality to receive data electronically to process claims to completion and update the corporate data base needs to be integrated into VETSNET.

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 1998

Estimated Cost: Component of CPS budget initiative

Benefits: If this capability is attainable, it would provide for electronically receiving a claim and having the data establish a master record or update it. This would allow claims to be received from out-based VA personnel or VSO's.

Action Item Number P2

Title: Rule Based Development

Description: The development program in CPS is rule based. VETSNET does not contain this feature. The ruled based development feature of CPS should be integrated into VETSNET.

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 1998

Estimated Cost: Component of CPS budget initiative

Benefits: Rule based programs eliminate errors of omission. This would ensure that all information necessary to properly complete a claim would be developed at the time a claim was received. Thereby eliminating piecemeal development and reducing the amount of time needed to adjudicate a claim. Additional benefits would accrue if VSO's are inputting claims, since they would be utilizing the rules based development system.

Action Item Number P3

Title: Automatic Letter Generation

Description: When all data necessary to develop a claim is input, the necessary letters requesting evidence should be automatically generated.

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 1998

Estimated Cost: Component of CPS budget initiative

Benefits: There is little decision making required when a claimant reports the sources of evidence. There is an disproportionate amount of clerical work needed to request evidence. If the data concerning the source of information is entered into the system, the required letters could be generated automatically. This would save the VSR the time now spent in addressing the letters and selecting the appropriate letters.

Action Item Number P4

Title: Track Claim Location Information (long term)

Description: In today's business world, the need to satisfactorily answer a customer's inquiry as to the status of a claim is crucial. Whether the inquirer is a VSR or VSO asking for the status on behalf of a claimant in today's environment or the claimant seeking the status directly in the future, there needs to be a tracking tool that provides details as to what has been accomplished, what needs to be done, what evidence has been received and what necessary evidence is outstanding.

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 2000

Estimated Cost: Component of CPS budget initiative

Benefits: Until a paperless claim is achieved, there would be significant savings in the time spent sending mail to files to have a claims folder pulled and then reviewed. Since the evidence requested and received would be available on all claims, there would be no need to pull a claims folder until the case management system indicated that all evidence had been received. There would be additional savings in the number of man-hours needed to respond to VAIs and Congressionals if the inquirer could be told the specific status of the claim.

Action Item Number P5

Title: Track Claim Location Information

Description: CPS has limited claims tracking capability. CATS does have claims tracking ability, but does not have rule based development capability. CPS and CATS should be integrated to utilize the rule based development of CPS with the claims tracking ability of CATS. (This is recommended as a short-term BPR Lab initiative.)

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 1999

Estimated Cost: Component of CPS budget initiative

Benefits: Anyone requesting the status of a claim will readily be able to determine what evidence has been requested and what evidence has been received. They will also be able to identify what stage of processing the claim is entering.

Action Item Number P6

Title: Military Record Request (3101 generation)

Description: When a claim for benefits is received electronically or input by keystroke, and it is identified as needing military records, the request for these records should be generated automatically to the correct military records center. The records requested would be based on the type of claim received and the information concerning the claimant's military service that was input. This could be accomplished by additional changes to VETSNET.

Responsibility: RMC, C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 2000

Estimated Cost: Component of CPS budget initiative and RMC Automate VAF 3101 initiative

Benefits: There is considerable time lost between the receipt of the claim and the identification of the correct military records center. If the request is sent to an incorrect military records center, additional time is lost until the request is returned as not properly addressed or forwarded to the correct military center. This initiative would eliminate any lost time.

Action Item Number P7

Title: Integrate RBA decision into VETSNET payment system.

Description: RBA decision should, upon completion of the rating decision, automatically transfer the necessary information into the VETSNET system.

Responsibility: 20S, C&P Service

Completion Date: 2001

Estimated Cost: Component of VETSNET II

Benefits: Allowing the rating decision data to automatically be incorporated into the VETSNET system will eliminate the need for duplication of data input by the Rating Certified VSR and the VSR. This would save numerous FTEE by allowing the Rating Certified VSR to actually effectuate payment and benefit notification upon completion of the rating decision. The current system requires the Rating Specialist to input the data necessary for the rating decision. The rating decision is then transferred to a Veteran's Claims Examiner, who re-enters this date into the BDN system and into the PCGL letter writing system. Another benefit is that by making the Rating Certified VSR the last person to see the claim, the VSR becomes a more "front end" oriented employee.

Action Item Number P8

Title: Extract payment information from RBA decision and send to BDN.

Description: A short term solution that would allow the RBA decision to, upon completion of the rating decision, automatically transfer the necessary payment information into the BDN system.

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 1999

Estimated Cost: Component of VETSNET budget initiative

Benefits: This short term solution will alleviate the duplication of data input by the Rating Certified VSR and the VSR. If the payment information needed by BDN were extracted from the rating decision produced by RBA, it would start to streamline the process of generating an award of benefits. This would save FTEE and allow the VSR the opportunity to devote more time to front end development, which is essential during the transition period of BPR implementation. In addition, it would allow for completion of the claims processing system in a more timely manner.

Action Item Number P9

Title: Make archived data and text available nation-wide, using a document management system.

Description: Create a database from which archived data and text can be accessed nation-wide.

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 2000

Estimated Cost: RBA Component of VETSNET II

Benefits: Creating a document management system which can be accessed nationwide will have numerous benefits. At the point of initial veteran contact, information such as last rating decisions, current disabilities, payment information, and previous veteran contact, would all be available to the VSR at the same time that he or she has the veteran on the phone. This would allow for a quicker and more accurate dissemination of information. This alleviates the need for some of the written correspondence which we process at this time. This also allows the first person that the veteran talks with to have the information available to make necessary decisions. The ability to make decisions and process awards while the veteran is still on the phone will mean a reduction in pending claims as well as a more expeditious handling of the claim.

The archived data base will assist the VBA in it's transition to have a paperless benefits delivery system. Thereby alleviating the need for the traditional claims folder in processing awards.

This system will effectuate the very expeditious processing of the veteran's claim and requests for information. This will save FTEE and provide for more accurate and complete information dissemination.

Action Item Number P10

Title: Put context sensitive help into all applications developed.

Description: Each application that is developed should have context sensitive help available throughout the system. This should be incorporated into the design of each individual system at the time of development.

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: Ongoing

Estimated Cost: N/A

Benefits: The availability of context sensitive help to the system user will allow for more complete and consistent claims processing development and benefits delivery. This will be accomplished by allowing the development and processing of the claim to be accomplished at the

earliest possible point in the claims processing system. The development of needed information can be accomplished by a VSR at any level in the training process. The availability of this help information will also assist in training the new users of the system.

Action Item Number P11

Title: Develop reference databases for various purposes.

Description: Databases should be developed which make available the various laws, rules, regulations, and procedure by which the VBA processes claims and delivers benefits. This will involve rewriting and reorganizing directives.

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 2000

Estimated Cost: Component of VETSNET II budget initiative

Benefits: Databases which incorporate the laws, rules, regulations, and procedures by which we process claims are a vital need in the claims processing system. This allows for more consistent claims development and benefits delivery. In addition, they ensure that the VBA employees are provided with the most up-to-date and accurate data by which to process these claims. This is extremely important in light of the recent changes of laws and regulations. This will also allow for the dissemination of these laws and regulations to the claimant, thereby enhancing the claimant's knowledge of the requirements for benefits delivery. This will in turn alleviate some of the notices of disagreement received by BVA by being able to provide complete consistent data up front when needed by the claimant.

Action Item Number P12

Title: External sources linked into applications as required.

Description: External information that is obtained should automatically be incorporated whenever necessary into the various applications as they are developed.

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 2002

Estimated Cost: Ongoing

Benefits: This will allow the VSR and Rating Certified VSR to have the latest information available at the appropriate time. In addition, it will alleviate the duplication of data input into the necessary application. This will also reduce the development time required to

process the claim by eliminating the need to request information from various organizations and departments.

Action Item Number P13

Title: Automatically adjust pension payment based on financial data received through interfaces.

Description: Currently pension is adjusted manually through EVR reporting. Ideally EVR's would be completed through electronic interfaces with the financial data at their source. Receipt of this electronic data should be the event which triggers a recalculation of pension rate.

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 2002

Estimated Cost: Component of VETSNET III

Benefits: Saving of man-hours associated with pension adjustments.

Action Item Number P14

Title: Enhance CATS to flag certain records (short term).

Description: There are instances in which certain claims have traditionally received a higher processing priority. Such claims may include homelessness or terminally ill veterans, or cases in which congressional interest has been expressed. CATS should allow special indicators, or markers, to "flag" these cases when the case management record is accessed.

Responsibility: VARO Roanoke, 20S

Completion Date: 1998

Estimated Cost: Component of CPS budget initiative

Benefits: Will save on follow-up processing time for cases of special interest.

Action Item Number P15

Title: Select Ad-hoc Query Tool(s) (both analysis and work in-progress).

Description: In addition to standardized reporting capability, there should be an ad hoc reporting capability using specialized sorting criteria. It is anticipated that initially this capability would be limited to a centralized point.

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 1999

Estimated Cost: Component of Corporate Data Warehouse/Decision Support Strategy

Benefits: Quicker response to special interest inquiries and more definitive replies to processing questions.

Action Item Number P16

Title: Combine VETSNET and VACOLS to allow continuous tracking from date of claim.

Description: VACOLS tracks a claim from receipt of VAF 9 to resolution of the appeal. Tracking in VETSNET does not include appeals processing. If tracking in VETSNET were extended through the appeal period, it would be far more comprehensive and useful for analyzing trends in claims processing and appeals.

Responsibility: C&P Service, BVA, 20S

Completion Date: 2001

Estimated Cost: Under consideration for VETSNET II

Benefits: A single tracking tool is more convenient and will allow better statistical analysis.

Action Item Number P17

Title: Migrate ATS functionality to VACOLS.

Description: ATS measures a claim's progress from notice of disagreement to VAF 9; VACOLS measures from VAF 9 to resolution of the appeal. ATS is a part of BDN; VACOLS uses Windows GUI and is attached to an Oracle database. There is general agreement that VACOLS is a superior tracking system and is more relevant to our future needs than ATS. Currently an initiative is underway to extend the tracking in VACOLS to include the ATS tracking period and other features that would enhance the application.

Responsibility: C&P Service, BVA, 20S

Completion Date: 1998

Estimated Cost: Addressed in Information exchange baseline (1999)

Benefits: The Windows format of VACOLS is more user-friendly, and the Oracle database is easier to query.

Action Item Number P18

Title: Take electronic filing through CPS.

Description: The intake of claims data--either over the phone or in person--should be entered directly into the CPS application without an intermediary paper form.

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 1999

Estimated Cost: Component of CPS initiative

Benefits: The alternative to electronic data intake is the current paper system which is inefficient.

Action Item Number P19

Title: Develop full electronic filing functionality.

Description: Electronic claims data should be captured as early in the claims process as possible. An electronic claims form should be available over such media as the Internet. The fields in this electronic form should link with corresponding database fields to allow for more timely claims processing.

Responsibility: C&P Service

Completion Date: 2002

Estimated Cost: Component of VETSNET III

Benefits: An electronic format allows not only the quick transfer of data but also the immediate editing of data from the claimant, with a potentially more focused claim.

Action Item Number P20

Title: Record Transfer

Description: The concept of Information Centers will require the transfer of electronic records from the IC to the RO in order to resolve case specific issues. This action item will create the functionality to smoothly transfer case specific data and allow for the warm transfer from a VSR at a IC to a VSR at the RO.

Responsibility: 20S4, 20S, C&P Service

Completion Date: 2000

Estimated Cost: Available in VETSNET I

Benefits: This item will improve customer satisfaction as their concerns are routed to the person most capable of resolving them. This functionality will replace the VAI system that did not result in immediate replies. The primary benefit will be in eliminating VAIs and the improved quality of response and timeliness of response.

Action Item Number P21

Title: Universally Accepted Structure

Description: This action item is critical for applications developed at field stations or in parallel to centralized IT initiatives. It does not limit the ability of developers to solve business solutions. Rather, it assures that software tools will be compatible with other IT tools and can seamlessly integrate and share data. This an essential piece for eliminating the stovepipe approach to claims processing.

Responsibility: 20S

Completion Date: 2000

Estimated Cost: N/A

Benefits: Applications will no longer stand alone or require labor intensive re-keying as users move to new tools in background operations. Needed data will migrate or enter via interfaces that can be assured compatibility by adhering to the accepted structure. Significant savings in man-hours will be gained by distributing application development to key business areas with the assurance that the applications will be beneficial to all users, regardless of the size or scope of operations.

Action Item Number P22

Title: Automated Award Adjustments via Interface

Description: While interfaces will improve the speed and accuracy with which we obtain needed information, the ability to link this data to BDN changes, in an automated manner, is a powerful key to saving FTE in benefit adjustments. In the absence of major legislative changes in the pension program, the need to link income changes in Social Security and other annuity programs to automated adjustments will be critical to reducing the man-hours devoted to maintenance adjustment to our program. Further, adjustments based upon hospital stays, both in

pension and compensation, require time consuming reviews and actions. These automated adjustments will be needed if we are to devote more time to the customer service side of claims processing and relegate maintenance of benefits to more automated features.

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 2002

Estimated Cost: Component of VETSNET III

Benefits: Major savings in FTE can be gained by automating routine maintenance adjustments, pension in particular. It is widely known that the cost of FTE to adjust pension awards exceeds the cost saving related to the adjustments.

Action Item Number P23

Title: Rating Data Storage/Support

Description: To use an expert system approach to automating some of the more routine rating actions to allow VCR to do some simple ratings. While it is currently felt that the full scope of rating issues are so complex as to not lend themselves to expert systems, some of the decisions that relate to tables could be supported by expert system logic. In particular, issues related to hearing loss and visual acuity are examples of decisions that could be supported by IT.

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 2000

Estimated Cost: RBA component of VETSNET II

Benefits: The primary benefit in this action item is in allowing certain decisions to be delegated to VSR and allow the RVSR to better utilize his or her time in the most complex of issues. Having decisions made at lower grade levels will save FTE.

Action Item Number P24

Title: Administrative Decisions

Description: This action item results in RBA having additional functionality to handle Administrative Decisions using the same background support currently used to develop ratings.

Responsibility: C&P Service

Completion Date: 1999

Estimated Cost: Component of CPS Initiative

Benefits: By using standardized text and format features currently in RBA, we can save the time and man-hours currently being expended in creating Administrative Decisions using pure word processing systems.

Action Item Number I1

Title: Internet solutions for ARMS (Automated Reference Manual System)

Description: Make ARMS available to the public and external users via the Internet

Responsibility: 20S, 20S52

Completion Date: 2000

Estimated Cost: Included in P11

Benefits: Enables external users to more effectively interact with the VA.

Action Item Number I2

Title: DoD Electronic interface

Description: Establish formal agreements with DOD to exchange information electronically about service and medical records. The exchange of information will be affected by the form in which the sources hold their information. The development of interfaces to exchange this information will have to be constructed to accommodate these forms.

Responsibility: 20S, C&P Service, Records Management Center

Completion Date: 1998

Estimated Cost: Begun in 1997 and part of base, Incremental funding is component of VA RMC Input DD214 Data initiative

Benefits: Faster and more efficient development of claims

Action Item Number I3

Title: VHA/VBA agreements

Description: Establish additional MOU's between VBA and VHA to facilitate joint efforts to share mutually supportive information.

Responsibility: VHA, VBA

Completion Date: 1998

Estimated Cost: None

Benefits: Ease of use and accessibility to VHA/VBA electronic systems.

Action Item NumberI4

Title: Expand data exchange with other federal agencies

Description: Enhance electronic interfaces with other federal agencies (IRS, Railroad Retirement Board, DoD/DMDC, etc.) to allow for automatic income adjustments.

Responsibility: C&P Service, 20S

Completion Date: 2000

Estimated Cost: Included in base for Information Exchange

Benefits: Reduce claims processing time; reduce amount of human intervention

Action Item Number I5

Title: Electronic interface with National Archives

Description: Provide electronic interface with the National Archives to support eligibility and evidence gathering process.

Responsibility: 20S, RMC, Central Area, C&P Service

Completion Date: 1998

Estimated Costs: Component of RMC PIES initiative

Benefits: Improves timeliness of evidence gathering; eliminate duplicate requests for the same data.

Action Item Number I6

Title: National Cemetery System links

Description: Provide electronic access to the National Cemetery System employees and authority to process payment of burial benefits.

Responsibility: 20s, C&P Service, National Cemetery Service

Completion Date: 2000

Estimated Cost: No cost

Benefits: Free C&P FTEE to work other claims; single source for burial benefits; timeliness of providing claimant benefits.

Action Item Number I7

Title: Establish local interfaces to obtain private medical information.

Description: Automate access to private medical systems or automate the transfer of that information under local ad hoc agreements.

Responsibility: Local Area Directors and Regional Office Directors.

Completion Date: Ongoing

Estimated Cost: Will vary - Local initiatives

Benefits: Reduces the veterans' reporting burden and improves timeliness of claims processing.

Action Item Number I8

Title: Establish on-line interface with SSA.

Description: Provides direct access for claims processors to SSA information for verification of dependents, income and disability rating information.

Responsibility: VBA, SSA at the MOU level; C&P Service, 20S for implementation

Completion Date: 1998

Estimated Cost: In Information Exchange baseline

Benefits: Improves timeliness of claims processing; minimizes overpayments; supports automated adjustment of pension payments.

Action Item Number I9

Title: Provide collocated veterans representatives with direct access.

Description: Veterans representatives will be provided direct access to appropriate VBA applications and systems when they are involved with submitting and developing claims.

Responsibility: 20S, Area Directors, Regional Office Directors

Completion Date: 1999

Estimated Cost: Minimal

Benefits: Augments VBA FTEE; improves timeliness of claims processing; increases accessibility for veterans; enhances partnership and collaboration between VBA, veterans representatives and veterans.

Action Item Number I10

Title: Provide out-based veteran representatives with direct access

Description: Veterans representatives will be provided direct access to appropriate VBA applications and systems when they are involved with submitting and developing claims.

Responsibility: 20S, Area Directors, Regional Office Directors

Completion Date: 1999

Estimated Cost: Minimal

Benefits: Augments VBA FTEE; improves timeliness of claims processing; increases accessibility for veterans; enhances partnership and collaboration between VBA, veterans representatives and veterans.

Action Item Number I11

Title: Provide basic electronic access

Description: Provide electronic access to the general public to receive general information and claims specific details.

Responsibility: 20S; C&P Service, partnering local field facilities

Completion Date: 2000

Estimated Cost: In Information Center Initiative

Benefits: Reduces the number of telephone inquiries that detract from claims processing; increases accessibility for veterans information; provides timely access to information.

Action Item NumberI12

Title: Provide enhanced electronic access for the claims process

Description: Provide electronic access for submission of claims applications and evidence and to receive claims status information. (Similar to P19)

Responsibility: 20S; C&P Service, partnering local field facilities

Completion Date: 1999

Estimated Cost: Minimal cost

Benefits: Reduces the number of telephone inquiries that detract from claims processing; increases accessibility for veterans information; provides timely access to information.

Action Item Number I13

Title: Outbased employee access

Description: Outbased employees will be provided direct access to appropriate VBA applications and systems.

Responsibility: 20S, Area Directors, RO Directors, C&P Service

Completion Date: Ongoing

Estimated Cost: In base

Benefits: Maximizes use of scarce resources; improves employee satisfaction; increases productivity.

Action Item Number I14

Title: Establish State and local agency interfaces

Description: Customer service includes the release of information in the veteran/beneficiary's behalf. Quality criteria of the accuracy and timeliness of that release are objectives. The opportunity is to minimize resource demands for non-decision activities through carefully planned initiatives. Electronic delivery of this information to State and local agencies and, when possible, provision for electronic query capability for those agencies is required to access VA databases and extract the information they need for their own decision processes.

Specific needs will vary greatly from state to state and no attempt has been made to inventory existing interfaces.

Responsibility: RO Directors with support from Area Directors

Completion Date: Ongoing

Estimated Cost: Will vary by facility

Benefits: Automate other-agency access to the VBA database or minimally, the actual transfer of that information; reduce the resources involved in an essentially non-decision making activity; improve the timeliness and accuracy of customer service at ROs.

Action Item Number T1

Title: Develop Concept of Operations

Description: Develop a business plan for handling all telecommunications issues. This includes determining where to route C&P claims related calls, general information calls, and calls for other VBA business lines: Insurance, Education, Loan Guaranty. Also, included is identification of those services that can be provided using an Automated Response System (ARS) and Interactive Voice Response (IVR).

Responsibility: Area Directors, SMC, 20S4

Completion Date: 10/01/97

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefit: Once VBA decides how customers will access VBA, how VBA will provide service, and who and where that service will be provided, 20S4 can begin development of a detailed operational model. This is a critical planning step that will allow VBA to determine the most effective telecommunications architecture needed to implement VBA's Vision state.

Action Item Number T2

Title: Develop Detailed Operational Model

Description: The detailed operational model will provide very detailed information about how every type of telephone call to VBA will be handled including how and where calls will be routed, the required technology and interfaces needed to route and service calls, the locations of primary telecommunications technologies (e.g. ARS) and the locations of supporting technologies (e.g. what telecommunications investment is needed at remote locations and ROs).

Responsibility: 20S4

Completion Date: April 1, 1998

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefit: The Detailed Operational Model will provide the specific functional requirements necessary to prepare a request for proposal from vendors.

Action Item T3

Title: Automated Pay Information System

Description: Through the use of a payment database and text to speech technology, payees will be able to obtain their current pay status information. Since some of this information (e.g., payee's address) is protected under the Privacy Act of 1974, access to the information should be password protected.

A rudimentary system for access to this information is already available at the St. Paul Information Center. This involves downloading pay status information into a database that is then made available to callers. While this does not provide the latest information to payees, it is nevertheless an improvement over the current procedure that requires the intervention of a counselor. Access to this database should be made available to as many payees as current equipment and resources allow, as part of the transition to the system that will provide fully automated, current data.

Responsibility: 20S4

Completion Date: 3/1/98

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefits: Historical telephone traffic data indicates that there is a significant increase in telephone traffic during the first days of each month. A significant portion of that traffic is attributed to payees seeking pay status information. Currently, counselors have to obtain identifying data from the payee and access the payment status database in order to provide the required information. These procedures are cumbersome and manpower intensive. Through the use of the automated system, the payee keys in the identifying data and the system provides instant, up-to-date information. This not only provides faster service to the caller, but also frees up the human resources to do other work. Thus, both the payee and the VA benefit from this system.

Action Item Number T4

Title: Telephone on each desk

Description: A telephone with incoming and outdialing capability will be on each VSRs desk at each Information Center and each RO.

Responsibility: Area Offices, 20S4

Completion Date: 10/1/98

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefits: Individual telephones are required for VSRs to receive incoming calls either to the information center or the RO. These may be general calls or claims-related calls. Some incoming calls for RO VSRs will be from claimants with cases assigned to the VSR. Outdialing capabilities will permit VSRs to contact claimants or other individuals to request information pertaining to claims or to explain decisions to claimants.

Action Item Number T5

Title: Voice Mail Capability

Description: Each RO will have voice mail capability.

Responsibility: Area Directors, 20S4

Completion Date: 10/1/98

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefits: Voice mail capability will enable callers to leave messages regarding claims or form requests during non-VBA business hours.

Action Item Number T6

Title: Convert to 800 service

Description: All local telephone lines coming into telephone units at all ROs will be converted to 800 lines.

Responsibility: Area Directors, 20S4

Completion Date: 7/1/98

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefits: Customers will be able to reach all ROs and Information Centers using the same toll free number. The ARS will be able to direct calls to the appropriate location based on

established criteria, and VBA will be able to manage call volume at a national level so that blocked calls are reduced and service is uniform throughout VBA. Calls can be rerouted to different ICs or ROs based on established call patterns or emergency situations.

Action Item Number T7

Title: Local/state benefit help file

Description: An on-line help file with local and state benefit information will be developed and made available to all VSRs at all ICs and ROs.

Responsibility: Area Directors, 20S5

Completion Date: 1/1/98

Estimated Cost: Included in operational base

Benefits: This help file will enable VSRs at all locations to answer questions about local benefits in any part of the country. This will improve service to callers because they will be able to get complete non-VA information no matter which state they are calling from. Currently, local information available to callers is restricted primarily to the area of jurisdiction of the RO the caller reaches.

Action Item Number T8

Title: VBA help file

Description: An on-line help file with information about all VA benefits (C&P, education, loan guaranty, insurance, etc.) will be developed and made available to all VSRs at all ICs and ROs.

Responsibility: VBA Business Lines, 20S5

Completion Date: 1/1/99

Estimated Cost: Included in operational base

Benefits: Although VSRs will spend a large part of their time processing C&P claims, they will still receive calls about other VA benefits, and they will receive questions about other VA benefits during their conversations with claimants about their C&P claims. Most general calls will be handled by ICs, but VSRs in ROs will receive calls during call overflow situations. VSRs must have current and readily available information about all VA benefits if they are to provide accurate and world class customer service to all callers.

Action Date Number T9

Title: RO Telephone Asset Profile

Description: The telephone equipment currently at each RO will be documented.

Responsibility: 20S4

Completion Date: 2/27/98

Estimated Cost: Included in operational base

Benefits: This asset inventory is necessary to determine what additional equipment will be needed to achieve the national telephone strategy.

Action Item Number T10

Title: Define IC Sites

Description: To achieve the long-term vision of implementing a national telephone system as outlined in the Vision Section, VBA Telecommunication Service must develop a detailed plan for replacement of local telecommunications equipment with a telecommunications architecture which allows VBA to route customer inquires to the location where they can receive quick, accurate and complete answers to questions, and problems with the first call.

To achieve this vision VBA must determine locations to place telecommunications technology. Some VSRs will be located at the IC but will need to be supplemented by VSR support from affiliated ROs. The following guidelines are offered:

- General inquiry calls may be handled by a combination of ARS, IC VSRs and RO VSRs. The percentage of calls handled by ARS will be determined by the effectiveness of these technologies to provide world class service.

- VBA expects that use of ARS will expand over time as technology improves and use of ARS becomes the choice of many VA customers.

- Dispersion of VSR support at ROs will provide Areas with more flexibility in using VSRs during low call periods.

- Finally, the mix of IC and RO VSRs will not be static. VBA anticipates that greater call volumes of claims related issues will be able to be handled at remote locations once VETSNET, CPS and other supporting technologies are available.

Responsibility: Area Directors

Completion Date: 8/31/98

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center initiative TBD 20S4 will provide telecommunications costs.

Areas may incur construction equipment costs, depending on the strategy employed, i.e. the more centralization of IC personnel at IC location.

Benefit: Information Centers will allow VBA to centralize call handling equipment so that telephone calls for large geographic areas can be handled at one site and routed to ARS, or available counselor who can handle the call. Overflow calls can be routed to other ICs or to supporting ROs. This strategy will eliminate VBA's blocked call problem.

Action Item Number T11

Title: Develop National Automated Response System (ARS).

Description: The ARS is a vehicle for providing information to callers without interaction with a VSR. The ARS will handle incoming calls requesting information to commonly asked questions. The ARS can work in concert with audiotex pre-recorded messages to provide information to callers. A FAX on demand system can be used to provide callers with electronic versions of VBA forms, documents, etc. in a hard-copy format. Speech recognition capabilities will enable the routing of callers with rotary telephones to be handled by the ARS rather than a VBA counselor.

Responsibility: 20S4

Completion Date: 10/1/98

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefits: The National Automated Response System will provide virtually unlimited customer access to VA services anytime, anywhere. The ARS will provide features that will minimize call blockage, improve telephone access to VBA services and the delivery of newly automated features such as automated call attendant, intelligent network services, audiotex messaging, and FAX services. This system should be able to handle an estimated 10 to 20 percent of all incoming call, freeing human resources to perform other functions.

Action Item Number T12

Title: Adopt National Automated Response System (ARS) Script.

Description: The National ARS Script provides a system of pre-recorded messages that provide answers to commonly asked questions and general benefits information to callers.

Responsibility: 20S4

Completion Date: 10/1/97

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefits: The National Automated Response System script will reduce the need of callers to interact with VSRs.

Action Item Number T13

Title: FAX back/automatic mailing labels

Description: The capability to provide FAX on demand to transmit standard VBA written forms or documents in a timely fashion without any human intervention or mailing expense. When there is a need to mail a form or a document, the system will provide an address label.

Responsibility: 20S4

Completion Date: 10/1/98

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefits: The FAX back/automatic mailing labels capability will provide callers with faster service while reducing the need to interact with VSRs.

Action Item Number T14

Title: Develop Area Specific Migration Strategy

Description: VBA currently answers most telephone inquires at 58 ROs. Generally, if all incoming trunk lines to a VBA RO are busy the caller receives a busy signal. The end state vision describes how customers will access VBA in 2002 by calling one toll-free number which will connect them to either automated services, an IC VSR, or a RO VSR if they have filed a claim. The transition to the vision state will not occur overnight. This migration from the current process to a national telecommunications strategy will be affected by two separate but interrelated factors:

- How telecommunications and other means of access to VBA supports the BPR redesigned C&P work process.
- Blocked calls.

These are separate issues in that blocked calls are a long-standing customer service problem that must be addressed immediately. These issues are interrelated because the transition

to the BPR reengineered process must be coordinated with changes in telecommunications and IT improvements at the same time that VBA works to reduce blocked calls. The reengineered claims process, as envisioned under BPR, presents new telecommunications challenges. This new process reorients VBA's approach to its customers, where VBA decision makers have a personal and proactive relationship with their customers. This new strategy will involve personnel who have not talked to customers before, answering calls where they have not been answered before, and using communications strategies that have not been employed to any great extent before

Some areas have already taken some steps to address blocked calls, notably the Central Area through the St. Paul Information Center. Other areas are also working on plans to address this problem. In most cases this involves the rerouting of blocked calls from one RO to another or to a central point such as an Information Center. As VBA Area Directors develop and implement plans for addressing blocked calls their strategies should link to the end state vision depicted in the Vision Section: i.e. claims related calls will go to ROs and general calls to Information Centers with support from ROs.

Initially, FTE to handle general calls may be dispersed among ROs rather than centralized at one location. As noted in the Vision Section, the Information Center is a way we handle calls more than a place where calls are answered. Shifting of FTE from ROs to IC's may be accomplished over time as ROs complete conversion to VSR positions, as technology such as ARS/IVR is made available and assessments of these changes are analyzed.

Responsibility: Area Directors

Completion Date: 9/1/98

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefit: Areas must take immediate action to address the problem of blocked calls. These actions will provide improved access to VBA customers. Linking changes to the Vision State will facilitate VBA's transition to the Vision state and retain staffing flexibility during the transition period.

Action Item Number T15

Title: On-Line Claim Status Information

Description: Callers to the VBA ARS would be able to access information concerning the status of a pending claim without having to speak to a VSR. The customer would enter a PIN or other identifier, which would allow access to the corporate database. Using voice recognition technology, the caller would be asked a series of questions and provided appropriate claim status information (e.g., receipt of service medical records, exam scheduled etc.)

Responsibility: VETSNET, 20S4

Completion Date: 6/30/99

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefit: VBA customers would be able to gain direct information about claim status 24 hours a day. Calls to VSRs would be limited to more substantive issues.

Action Item T16

Title: Pop-up/Data Transfer Technology.

Description: The caller will be prompted to provide a claim identification number. The Automated Response System will validate the identification number to the host data system. The caller's unique data record will be retrieved automatically from the host database and will be displayed on the VSR's workstation as the call arrives. Should there be a need to transfer the call, the data record will be transferred simultaneously. This capability will be dependent on the implementation of VETSNET.

Responsibility: 20S4, VETSNET

Completion Date: 6/30/99

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefits: VSRs will be able to provide callers with faster quality service. When calls have to be transferred, the receiving VSR will not have to repeat the data gathering process.

Action Item Number T17

Title: Develop Warm Transfer Capability

Description: VBA customers have long lamented their frustration about having to provide information about themselves and their claims to VBA personnel repeatedly. In the Vision State, VBA expects that most calls to VBA will be handled by the first person who answers the call, whether the call be answered at an Information Center or a RO. However, there may be situations where the quick resolution of an issue requires transferring a call to an expert, whether that be the VSR who is case managing a claim, or an expert in one of VBA's other business lines (e.g., education).

A "warm transfer" involves two components: transferring the call and transferring the data:

- When calls are transferred callers are told why the call is being transferred and the VSR does not release the call until the transfer is completed. This type of transfer can be done

now within many ROs but is often limited to specific divisions. Few ROs can transfer calls to other VA facilities.

- Transferring data will allow the expert receiving the call to have all the relevant VBA database information "pop-up" on his or her computer when the call is transferred. The caller is not required to provide this information again.

Responsibility: 20S4, 20S3

Completion Date: June 30, 1999

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefit: Callers to VBA wait for someone to call them back when they need to talk to an expert. Also, when calls are transferred they will not be placed back in a calling queue or inadvertently disconnected. Availability of data will also enhance service and reduce the amount of time VBA takes to resolve the issue.

Action Item Number T18

Title: Develop Call History Record

Description: A record of each call to VBA would be documented and included in the VETSNET database. The incoming telephone number would automatically be recorded by the FTS 2000 and documented in the corporate database if the telephone number matched a VBA record. The VSR would document the reason/disposition of the call.

Responsibility: VETSNET /20S4

Completion Date: 2002

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefit: VBA would have a record of previous calls for a specified period of time. A VSR would know when the customer last called VA, the reason for the call, and disposition. This enhancement will improve customer service and avoid VSRs having customers repeat issues, requests, etc.

Action Item Number T19

Title: Voice Recognition Technology

Description: Speech recognition will be used to compliment the ARS. The system will be able to recognize a spoken command independent of the speaker (e.g., digits zero through nine, yes, no, and oh) and route calls to menu options selected.

Responsibility: 20S4

Completion Date: 2002

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefits: Voice recognition technology will be used to route callers with rotary dial telephones through the ARS and to VSRs. Speech recognition will make menu-driven systems easier to use by allowing callers to speak their menu selection. Voice recognition will also allow disabled callers to use automated teleservices.

Action Item Number T20

Title: Automated Transactions

Description: Callers will be able to perform certain transactions, such as changing their address or their direct deposit information, without speaking to a VSR.

Responsibility: 20S4, VETSNET

Completion Date: 6/30/99

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefits: Currently, simple transactions such as a claimant's request to change an address or DD/EFT require a written request or contact with a VBA counselor. These kinds of activities could be processed more efficiently and provide better customer service by allowing claimants to complete these transactions by inputting their claim numbers or PINs and other appropriate data by pressing the corresponding keys on the telephone set.

The VSR, as a result of the automated transactions, will have more time to assist those callers who have more complex questions or issues to be resolved. Moreover, by enabling claimants to transact certain kinds of activities electronically, these activities could be provided 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, thereby enhancing customer service by providing greater convenience.

Action Item Number T21

Title: Develop Automated Outdialing Capability

Description: Telephones can be programmed to automatically place calls to parties outside VBA at specified times.

Responsibility: 20S4

Completion Date: 2002

Estimated Cost: Component of Information Center Initiative

Benefits: This will provide for a more efficient use of the VSR's time both at the RO and the IC and improved service to claimants. It will enable VSRs at ICs to respond to system-initiated calls from a telephone number list provided by manual entry or computer files at times when call volume is reduced. VSRs may use this as an outreach tool or a means to remind claimants of upcoming appointments, for example. RO VSRs will be able to program the system to place outbound calls based on the time of day and alert the VSR when the party is on the line. VSRs can electronically track and maintain customer call back lists in order to provide a more timely response. This will prevent the VSR having to remember to call a party at a specified time while at the same time permitting the VSR to reach the claimant at a time convenient to the claimant. The system will differentiate between busy signals, no answer signals, modem tones, answering machines, and hang-up signals so VSRs will not waste time trying to make telephone calls manually. The system will also provide an alternate message if an answering machine answers the call. The system will continue to place calls until the list is completed or a set time range is reached or the system is discontinued by a VSR.

Summary of IT Implementation Tasks

Task ID	Task Name	Definition	Dependencies	Reference(s)
21	Develop Electronic Data Exchange	The development of the interfaces with other VA elements as well as other federal, state & local data sources to dramatically reduce the time to obtain needed data.		P12,I2,I3,I4,I5, I6,I7 I8,I9,I10,I13,I14
49	**Information Systems**			
50	RBA enhancements & RBA/BDN Link	Transition initiatives to allow link independent applications pending VETSNET II & III		P8,P23,P24
51	Basic Intranet	Begin using the Intranet as an alternative to independent local databases.		I1
52	Redesigned ARMS on Intranet	Alternative to distributed CD-ROM technology		I1
53	CPS Modification, Testing and Roll-Out	Transition initiative to allow case management and telephone applications pending VETSNET III		P3, P5, P14
54	VETSNET I	Replacement of current BDN with VETSNET		IT page 22
55	Build Context Sensitive Help/Job Aids Init.	On-going requirement for all new applications		P10,I12,
56	VETSNET II	The migration of RBA and CPS functionality into VETSNET.	P3,P5,P6,P14	IT Appendix C, P1,P2,P4, P7,P9,P11,P15,P 16, P21
58	VETSNET III	The full implementation of electronic filing and automated award adjustments via interfaces.		P19,P13,P22
59	Electronic Applications Begin	Transition initiative for using CPS to initiative applications via telephone.	P3,P5,P14	P18

Task ID	Task Name	Definition	Dependencies	Reference(s)
60				
61				
63	**Telecommunications**			
64	Transition IT support for VSR position	IT infrastructure to support the VSR position.		T4, T5,T6,T9
65	Information Centers Established	Establishment of consolidated telephone response information centers.	T15	T1,T2,T3,T7,T8, T10 T11,T12,T13,T14,T16,T17,T18,T19,P20, T20,T21
66	On-Line Claims Status Information	Necessary for proper case tracking and status.		T15
67	3101 Generation (PIES)	Linkage with military record centers		P6
25	Begin Certification of VSRs	Date after which VBCs and VCEs will begin to be certified as VSRs and promoted to GS-10 position during the transition period based on reviews of work samples.	• Development of VSR Certification Standards and Measures • VSR Certification Testing at Lab Sites	HR Appendix, p3-10

Table C - 1: Summary of IT Implementation Tasks (continued)

Appendix D. IT/Telecommunications Team

Name	Station	Phone Number
Antonio Aponte	VARO Oakland	510-637-1127
Dennis Brennan	SRA	703-558-4003
John T. Barnes	VARO Wichita	316-688-6701
Sandy Bowron	VARO St. Petersburg	813-893-3211
Deborah Greitzer	VARO Oakland	303-914-2900
Peter Kostohryz	VARO&IC St. Paul	612-725-1780
John Q. Davis	VARO Columbia (NFFE rep)	803-765-5101
Bill Fillman (Team Leader)	VARO New Orleans	504-589-6491
Carl W. Hawkins, Jr.	VARO Columbia	803-255-4124c
Jim Jewell	VFW Washington, DC	202-543-2239
Molly McDaniel	VETSNET- St. Petersburg	813-893-3871
Larry Meador	VARO Houston	700-794-3443
Frank C. Newbell, Jr.	VARO Nashville (AFGE rep)	615-736-7328
Ann O'Hart	VARO Denver	303-914-5727
Elizabeth Ortmayer	SRA	703-558-4003
Robert Seavey	VBA Washington, DC	202-273-7266
Edward C. O'Brien	VARO Hartford	860-240-3027
Michael MacDonald	VARO Nashville (AFGE rep)	615-736-5334

Figure D-1: IT/Telecommunications Team Members

NAME	STATION	PHONE NUMBER
Kim Hancher	VA Central Office	202-273-6887
Jan Carlson	VA Central Office	202-273-6986
Richard Culp	VA Central Office	202-273-6842
Ed Weklar	VA Central Office	202-273-7596

Figure D-2: IT/Telecommunications Technical Consultants

Appendix E. Glossary of Terms

Abandoned Call - A call outcome where the caller hung up before getting the requested service (e.g., speaking to a VSR).

Abandoned Call Rate - The percentage of calls upon which the caller hangs up before receiving service. World class service organizations strive to achieve an abandoned call rate of less than 2%.

Application Server - A dedicated computer used to control the voice response unit and provide the execution platform for automated response system applications like automated attendant, audiotex, fax back, etc.

Audiotex - Telephony applications that dispense prerecorded information to callers. When audiotex systems are combined with database links and text-to-speech technology, callers can retrieve information that is stored in ASCII format

Automated Attendant - A call routing/answering system that enables incoming calls to be automatically transferred to the proper extension, resource, or department (e.g., sales, technical support, etc.) using audio prompts.

Automatic Call Distributor (ACD) - A specialized phone system for handling incoming calls according to a predetermined scheme.

Automated Contact Management - An automated application used to develop customer profiles based on previous call history and provide enhanced customer service.

Automated Outbound Dialing - An automated application used to enable VSRs to use their PCs to originate a phone call to VBA clients. These calls are typically the result of a customer inquiry that required further investigation, and the VSR must call back the client to achieve caller resolution.

ARMS (Automated Reference Manual System) - This system is a database of the current manuals and laws regarding receipt and administration of VBA benefits. In addition, this database includes Court of Veteran's Appeals (COVA) precedent decisions, as well as General Council Advisory Opinions.

Automated Response Systems (ARS) - A computerized system that provides telephony services to VBA clients. The ARS is capable of providing answers to client inquiries using technologies such as audiotex and fax back services.

ATS (Appeal Tracking System) - This system is designed to track the status of a pending appeal from the time the veteran first informs the VA of his disagreement until the appeal has been resolved. This system utilizes the BDN (Benefits Delivery Network) system.

Blocked Call - A call outcome where the caller received a busy signal and is unable to reach a VBA resource.

Blocked Call Rate - The percentage of offered calls which receive a busy signal. World class service organizations strive to achieve a busy rate of less than 1%.

Business Line - A VBA organizational business activity; currently consisting of the following: Compensation and Pension (C&P), Education (EDU), Loan Guaranty (LGY), Insurance (INS) and Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling (VR&C).

Case Management - VBA term signifying the task of managing open claims, typically for Compensation and Pension claims.

Check Status Database - A database built and maintained by the VBA providing callers timely information concerning the current status of C&P checks.

Computer Telephony Integration (CTI) - The concept of adding computer intelligence to a telephone call.

Congressional - These are inquiries from Members of Congress and the U. S. Senate, regarding their constituents (our claimant's). When the claimant request assistance from his/her congressional or senatorial representative, that representative will contact the VA regarding the claimant's case. The claims folder will be reviewed and the congressional or senatorial representative will be informed via phone and correspondence of the status of the issue.

Consultative Call Transfer - An application that enables a VSR to transfer a call, along with the client record associated with it, to another VSR or supervisor.

Corporate Data Base (Enterprise Data Base).- A single data base which captures and stores all information currently stored in the Legacy systems that are required organizational entities and attributes. The Enterprise Data Base stores data for ALL distributed business solutions regardless of service (i.e., C&P, Loan Guaranty, etc.) and location. Common data fields (i.e., name, address, SS#, etc.) must comply with standard conventions (i.e., field length, numeric, logic, etc.). Use of an Enterprise Data Base is a fundamental concept in the Enterprise Architecture that will eliminate the current "stovepipe" applications and numerous non-linked data bases.

EVR (Eligibility Verification Report) - These are pension and parent's disability indemnity compensation (DIC), forms that are completed yearly by the claimant. They provide information as to the claimant's income, net worth, and employment data.

FAX - Facsimile Transmission. The transmission of photographs, maps, diagrams, and other graphical data by communication channels. The image is scanned at the transmitting site, transmitted as a series of impulses (normally at 9600 bps), and reconstructed at the receiving station, to be duplicated on paper

Fax Back - This service offers the instant delivery of specified information to any fax machine in response to telephone prompts.

First Call Resolution - The percentage of calls in which the caller's issues are resolved by one agent without requiring a transfer or hand-off to a second person. World class service organizations strive to achieve a first call resolution rate greater than 85%.

Intelligent Networks - The concept of using resources contained inside the carrier network to provide value-added services such as call routing, etc.

Interactive Voice Response (IVR) - A telephony system where applications prompt the caller for keypad (or spoken) input and use that response to perform actions on a database.

Management Information Systems (MIS) - Provides managers and supervisors direct access to, and dynamic control of call center resources and their features. System managers and supervisors can use this technology to analyze agent and system performance, gather real-time and historical management information, and perform system administration.

PCGL (Personal Computer Generated Letters) - PCGL is a letter writing program that is designed to generate award, disallowance, predetermination and post-determination letters.

Predictive Dialer - An automated system that is used to place outbound calls based on anticipated workload of call center agents. Dialing is initiated before the operator is idle and waiting. By detecting answering machines and handling calls over to agents only when live prospects have been reached, these systems free up agents for actual customer contact.

Proactive Outreach - A computer telephony application that can be programmed to place a recorded reminder call to clients in advance of a scheduled appointment or other type of event.

Queue Waiting Time - The total time (in seconds) a received call is placed in a queue before being answered by an attendant or agent. World class service organizations strive to achieve a queue waiting time less than 60 seconds.

RBA (Rating Board Automation) - This program allows the Rating Specialist or Rating Certified Veterans Service Representative, to process rating decisions. This is an executable program which converts the needed information into a Word for Windows document.

VACOLS (Veteran's Appeals Control and Locator System) - This system is designed to track the status of a pending appeal from the time the VA Form 9 is filed until the appeal has been resolved.

VAI's (Veteran Assisted Inquiries) - These actions are processed as a result of telephone contact with the veteran or his/her representative. They usually regard a pending claim. When a VAI is taken over the phone, the Veteran's Benefits Counselor (VBC) will take the information

needed, and then get back with the veteran via the phone or through correspondence with an answer to his/her question.

VETSNET - A replacement for the Benefits Delivery Network (BDN) payment system characterized by a corporate relational data base, a three tiered client-server architecture, user designed Visual Basic presentation screens and on-line processing. The improvements in claims processing functionality are primarily those related to increased access by customers to their claim information, more user friendly processing screens and real time processing. Improvements in program management will derive from the capability of the system to capture data at the issue level. VETSNET will be the foundation system to which new claims processing functionality will be added. Basic veteran/dependent information will be available to all benefit program information systems (C&P, Education, Loan Guaranty, Vocational Rehabilitation and Insurance.) Payment, accounting and existing rudimentary claims processing for education, compensation and pension benefit programs are the basic components of the system application.

VETSNET II - The product of application development activity to incorporate rule based, stand alone systems such as the C&P Claims Processing System (CPS) to the corporate data base; and extend the functionality to include the creation of ratings (Rating Board Automation - RBA). The objective is to develop an integrated system which supports one-time data input for the development of a claim and reuse of the information in subsequent processing to the point of award decision and payment.

VETSNET III - Continued incremental functionality and the development of automated decision making.

VSR - Traditionally the Veterans Benefits Counselor (VBC) was VBA's public contact representative with veterans and other customers. VBCs handled personal interviews, answered telephone calls and replied to incoming correspondence. More recently the VBA field structure has moved to combining the functions of the Adjudication and Veterans Services Divisions. As a result, the position of the VBC has evolved into a position of several different titles: customer service representative (CSR), team member, case manager, VBC (still used in many instances), and Veterans Services Representative (VSR). The generic term VSR represents the public contact person in VBA.

Voice Forms - A voice mail application that allows customers to record specific information in response to voice prompts for the purposes of completing forms documents.

Voice Mail - Provides the basic ability to record, store and manipulate spoken messages.

Warm Call Transfer - A call outcome where the call was transferred to another resource along with the corresponding call information (e.g., caller name, account number, etc.).