

**RESPONDING TO ELECTRONIC INQUIRIES FROM THE VA INTERNET
HOMEPAGE**

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE:** This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Handbook establishes procedures for VHA staff in responding to electronic (e-mail) inquiries from Veterans and other members of the public.
- 2. SUMMARY OF ISSUE:** This is a new issuance for responding to electronic inquiries from Veterans and other members of the public to the VA Internet Homepage.
- 3. RELATED ISSUE:** VHA Directive 1003.
- 4. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** The Office of the Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management (10N). Questions can be directed to the Director, National Veteran Service and Advocacy Program, at 518-626-5673.
- 5. RESCISSION:** None.
- 6. RECERTIFICATION:** This VHA Handbook is scheduled for re-certification on or before the last working day of October 2008.

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Under Secretary for Health

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RESPONDING TO ELECTRONIC INQUIRIES FROM THE VA INTERNET HOMEPAGE

1. PURPOSE

This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Handbook establishes procedures for VHA staff in responding to electronic inquiries from veterans and other members of the public which are received through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Homepage.

2. DEFINITIONS

E-mail is a means of sending messages between computers using a computer network, or over a modem connected to a telephone line. This information consists primarily of messages, but may also include attachments such as: calendars, directories, distribution lists, word-processing documents, spreadsheets, and other electronic documents. E-mail is stored in a digital format rather than on paper and is retrievable at a future date. Due to format, e-mail permits instant communication and transmittal of up-to-date information similar to the telephone. Unlike current telephone features, e-mail creates a record of the information that is being transmitted.

3. BACKGROUND

a. Electronic communication provides new opportunities for enhanced interaction and information delivery and facilitates intra- and inter-agency communication. Timely and responsive communications with Veterans through the VA Homepage, as well as through Network websites, is an important component of Veteran customer service.

b. The VA Homepage provides various means for Veterans to contact VA through links to e-mail groups and websites. The VA website includes a "Contact the VA" link located on the bottom of most pages, which enables Veterans to ask questions, or to submit compliments, complaints and suggestions. Through the use of the Inquiry Routing and Information System (IRIS), questions submitted through the VA website are routed to appropriate VA Central Office Program Offices; and complaints, compliments, and suggestions related to health care are routed to the Network or facility where care was provided.

4. STANDARD PROCEDURES

In the interest of providing good customer service, VA is striving for consistency in the method of receipt, routing, tracking, and responding to electronic mail requests. The preferred method of electronic communication for VHA with its constituents is through the use of IRIS. IRIS is a Secure Socket Layer (SSL) enabling an encrypted connection between the Veteran and VA. IRIS provides a link to the Privacy Act and an inclusion of the confidentiality disclaimer. *NOTE: Complete instruction manuals on the use of the IRIS system are located at <http://vaww.va.gov/irisinfo/page.cfm?pg=2>. Additional suggestions for responding to Veterans' inquiries are listed in Appendix A.*

a. **Establishing Response Groups.** Each Network and VHA Program Office that responds to Veteran e-mails received through the VA Homepage, such as the Health Eligibility Center and

the Health Administration Service must establish an Internet e-mail group(s) where electronic inquiries are directly routed through IRIS. The e-mail group(s) need to consist of adequate representation in order that inquiries can be responded to in a timely manner, regardless of staff leave and other workload commitments. Each Network and Program Office must also establish a written policy outlining the responsibilities for responding to electronic inquiries from Veterans.

b. **Timeliness.** An automatic response is sent through IRIS, to each electronic inquiry, notifying the inquirer of the date the inquiry was received, the department that received the inquiry, and an anticipated 5-business day response date. In the event that more time is needed to respond to the inquiry, the responding office must notify the inquirer that additional time is required including a new projected response date and VA contact information (phone number and address). To assist responders in meeting the 5-day goal of responding to inquiries, VHA utilizes the functions of IRIS.

(1) **Standard Response Function.** VHA, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) have created Standard Responses for employees to use when responding to Veterans. These Standard Responses are located within the IRIS response system. **NOTE:** *To propose a standard response for VHA, contact the Program Coordinator for Veterans Service and Patient Advocacy Program at 217-444-2034. For instructions on how to use the Standard Response function, see the IRIS instructional manual at <http://vaww.va.gov/irisreplacement>.*

(2) **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).** In order to decrease the number of inquiries, VHA, VBA, and NCA have developed listings of FAQs. When a trend is found regarding a particular topic, a FAQ and answer is placed on the website. The FAQ database is updated and is searchable by topic. **NOTE:** *Responders are encouraged to identify trends and propose updates to the FAQ page by contacting the Program Coordinator for the Veterans Service and Patient Advocacy Program at 217-444-2034.*

(3) **Reports.** Managers can view reports that will assist in the effective management of electronic inquiries through IRIS which offers reports on staff effectiveness, staff performance, and inquiry type. **NOTE:** *For a full description of reports, refer to the IRIS Information Website at <http://vaww.va.gov/irisinfo/page.cfm?pg=2>.*

(a) **Privacy and Confidentiality.** The protection of the privacy and confidentiality of patient medical information is a priority. In the event that an inquiry requests specific medical information, a standard response is sent informing the Veteran that due to the sensitivity of the information requested, an electronic response cannot be provided. The name and phone number of a staff member and the mailing address of the facility or Program Office that they can contact must be provided.

1. Electronic mail communications may best be regarded as a postcard rather than as a sealed letter. Disclosure may occur intentionally or inadvertently when an unauthorized user gains access to electronic messages. Disclosure may also occur when electronic mail messages are forwarded to unauthorized users, directed to the wrong recipient, or printed in a common area where others can read them.

2. Since e-mail is not considered a secure network, IRIS is used to forward e-mail inquiries to staff members who have a need to know, in order to resolve and close the inquiry. If the inquiry is referred to a staff member who is not an IRIS user, the employee responsible for the forwarding of the inquiry must close the inquiry in IRIS upon notification that the inquiry has been handled. An internal note may be added to the forwarded IRIS message indicating how the message is being forwarded. In addition, a note may be sent to the inquirer indicating that the message has been forwarded and that a response should be received shortly.

a. Employees outside IRIS may provide a response via e-mail, provided that sensitive information is not transmitted, such as: social security numbers, date of birth, medial diagnosis, and treatment.

b. The following disclaimer must be added to outgoing Outlook messages: “This e-mail is intended only for the person or entity to which it is addressed, and may contain information that is privileged, confidential, or otherwise protected from disclosure. Dissemination, distribution, or copying of this e-mail or the information herein by anyone other than the intended recipient or for official internal VHA and/or VA business is prohibited. If you have received this e-mail in error, please notify the sender by reply e-mail, and destroy the original message and all copies.”

(b) Threatening Inquiries. Inquiries that threaten life or property are to be immediately reported to the local police office. If the threat involves another facility or personnel located at another facility, the involved facility police office needs to be notified. Follow local guidelines when a threat is made. Inquiries that specifically threaten the President of the United States, the Vice President, the judiciary, a Member of Congress, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs or the Deputy Secretary, must be immediately reported to the nearest local VA police office. For additional reference, see VA Handbook 0730, Security and Law Enforcement.

(c) Complaint and Compliment Inquiries. Complaints and compliments received through IRIS, or by other electronic means regarding medical care or access to medical care, need to be shared with the local VA facility Patient Advocate. These complaints are to be entered in the Veterans Health Information Systems and Technology Architecture (VistA) Complaint/Compliment Tracking Package per VHA Directive 1050.2.

5. REFERENCES

- a. VHA Directive 1050.2.
- b. IRIS Information website <http://vaww.va.gov/irisinfo>.
- c. VA Directive 6301.
- d. Connecticut State Library <http://www.cslib.org/email.htm>.

**ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS IN RESPONDING TO
ELECTRONIC INQUIRIES FROM VETERANS**

1. This may be the first contact a Veteran has with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The e-mail response is a reflection of the entire VA. Use this opportunity to explain what benefits are available and where the Veteran may go for additional assistance. The Inquiry Routing and Information System (IRIS) has a spell check feature. Be sure to utilize this prior to sending the response.
2. Before using the “reply” function, check to see that the response will be sent back to the correct person at the correct address. Make sure the reply is not sent to an entire list-serve or to others who may have been copied. If the answer bounces back, add an internal note to IRIS that the message bounced and find an alternative route for contacting the inquirer.
3. Give each Veteran a little more information than requested. For example: If an e-mail requests information on applying for a service connection for exposure to Agent Orange, include in the response information on how to apply for a service connected rating, how to receive an Agent Orange exam and be placed on the registry, and how to enroll for health care at the nearest VA.
4. Use short paragraphs to make it easier to scroll through the message. Keep responses short and to the point. Use complete sentences and proofread the reply before sending it.
5. E-mail cannot express mood, tone of voice, or body language. Answer questions in a courteous, professional, yet friendly manner. Be concise, avoid humor that may be misconstrued and keep opinions to yourself. Remember, VA’s reputation is made one contact at a time, one word at a time. Each VA employee is representing VA every time the employee in any way contacts a member of the public.
6. Whenever possible, provide the answer or information yourself instead of forwarding the message and relying on another person to respond. If a message must be forwarded, check to see exactly what part of the message is to be forwarded and verify who will receive it. Follow-up on the forwarded message to be sure it is answered. Let the inquirer know that the message has been forwarded to another department and that they should receive a response shortly.
7. When replying, address the person by name if known. Offer additional assistance, if necessary, and provide your name, phone number, and title at the end of your message.
8. IRIS tracks all number of inquiries, including what questions are asked frequently. Managers have the ability to use IRIS reports to determine promptness of responses and quality control activities; they are encouraged to do so.
9. The National Veteran Service and Advocacy Office, the Office of Public Affairs, and the Office of Consumer Affairs can assist in expressing responses and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).