

September 21, 2007

VHA CORRESPONDENCE MANAGEMENT

1. PURPOSE: This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Directive provides policy concerning the management of high priority correspondence within VHA.

2. BACKGROUND: The quality of correspondence prepared in VHA reflects directly on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the services VA provides.

a. As a result, it is expected that correspondence will be handled promptly and will provide the requested information in a courteous, compassionate manner that mirrors a customer-service orientation.

b. Attachment A provides VHA correspondence processing.

c. Attachment B provides an explanation of terms.

d. Attachment C provides Correspondence Priority Rules (CPR).

3. POLICY: It is VHA policy that all correspondence for the signature of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and the Under Secretary for Health is processed in a timely and appropriate manner. All correspondence will conform to the VA Correspondence Guidelines located on the Office of Executive Secretary's web site located at: <http://vaww.execsec.va.gov/>.

4. ACTION

a. **VHA Chief Officers.** VHA Chief Officers are responsible for ensuring that effective correspondence programs are in place within their functional areas, including:

(1) Designating a correspondence liaison and a backup who are responsible for the management of correspondence.

(2) Providing the Office of Executive Correspondence (101B) a final draft reply that is responsive to the incoming correspondence, and is timely, factually correct, and consistent with VHA and Departmental policy.

(3) Obtaining all needed concurrences on correspondence assigned for the signature of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and the Under Secretary for Health.

(4) Concurring on high-priority correspondence within 2 work days.

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(5) Updating the electronic document management system to reflect the current status of all correspondence assigned in their program area.

(6) Monitoring correspondence for timeliness and completeness until it has been signed.

(7) Applying the same principles of quality and timeliness as required for correspondence signed by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, or the Under Secretary for Health, for correspondence assigned for signature at the Chief Officer level. When 101B assigns correspondence to a program office for signature of the Chief Officer (or equivalent), the program office bears full responsibility for:

(a) Preparing a complete and timely response,

(b) Obtaining all needed concurrences,

(c) Signing and dispatching the signed response by the assigned due date,

(d) Forwarding a copy of the signed response to 101B in the electronic document management system for information,

(e) Tracking in the electronic document management system, and

(f) Closing the folder.

b. **Office of Executive Correspondence.** The Office of Executive Correspondence (101B) is responsible for:

(1) Timely and accurate correspondence administration from assignment to completion;

(2) Reviewing and editing final drafts submitted by program offices;

(3) Verifying concurrences;

(4) Preparing a final signature-ready package for the signatures of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and the Under Secretary for Health;

(5) Obtaining the concurrences of the Under Secretary for Health and the Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health;

(6) Providing guidance on correspondence issues as circumstances warrant;

(7) Serving as the primary point of contact with other VA elements on correspondence management issues; and

(8) Developing workload reports that accurately reflect performance in correspondence management.

5. REFERENCES: None.

6. FOLLOW-UP RESPONSIBILITY: The Director, Office of Executive Correspondence (101B), is responsible for the contents of this Directive. Questions may be directed to 202-273-6280.

7. RESCISSION: VHA Directive 2001-077 is rescinded. This VHA Directive expires September 30, 2012.

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Attachments

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ATTACHMENT A

VHA CORRESPONDENCE PROCESSING

Veterans Health Administration (VHA) correspondence processing emphasizes accountability, cooperation, and progress toward attainment of the goal of zero overdue correspondence.

1. **Office of Executive Correspondence.** The Office of Executive Correspondence (101B) is responsible for correspondence administration, including the efficiency of VHA correspondence processing.
2. **Program Office.** The program office, which has knowledge of concerns raised in incoming correspondence, takes the lead in developing a response. The program office is responsible for providing 101B with a final draft that fully responds to incoming correspondence in a timely and effective manner.
3. **Concurring Office.** The concurring office(s) has specific expertise on a portion of what is contained in a draft response. The concurring office is responsible for concurring, or providing comments, on a draft letter within 2 work days.
4. **High-priority Correspondence.** Congressional correspondence for the signatures of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and the Under Secretary for Health followed by other correspondence for the signatures of the aforementioned officials.
5. **Process.** This process, intended for correspondence prepared for the signatures of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and the Under Secretary for Health, is as follows:
 - a. An incoming letter is received in 101B, either from the Executive Secretariat (001B) or from other sources, and is entered into the electronic document management system and assigned to the appropriate program office(s) to prepare a draft response.
 - (1) Program offices are given up to 6 work days to prepare a final draft.
 - (2) When there are multiple, discrete issues presented requiring distinct responses from various program offices, 101B takes the lead in making simultaneous assignments and coordinating the response.
 - (3) Due dates are established based on the type of correspondence (see Att. C).
 - b. Program offices must review assignments immediately to determine if an interim response is needed. If an interim is needed, it should be prepared within 1 work day of the assignment. If there is uncertainty about whether an interim is necessary, an interim should be prepared immediately to prevent an assignment from becoming overdue.

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c. A final draft response addressing each of the issues raised in the incoming letter is developed within the stated timeframe by the program office, along with a concurrence and summary sheet.. This response is the official VHA position and must be fully coordinated.

(1) The response, concurrence and summary sheet, and all pertinent background information is entered into the electronic document management system by the program office and sent through appropriate internal and external channels before an assignment is made to 101B.

(2) The final VHA draft response is to represent current VHA policy or position on the issues. Informal external and internal VHA consultations are important steps in preparing the final draft that is assigned to 101B.

d. The Office of Executive Correspondence (101B) edits and re-formats the letter (and the fact sheet and concurrence and summary sheet, if required).

(1) If a draft response has not fully addressed all the issues in the incoming letter, 101B staff will contact the correspondence liaison, or alternate, for clarification or additional information. The correspondence liaison must ensure that 101B has all the information necessary to fully address all issues.

(2) Both 101B and program office staff should resolve a question or concern with a phone call or other informal means of communication when practical. A final draft should rarely be returned to the program office for rewrite.

e. Program offices are given 2 work days to concur on correspondence assigned to them by another program office. After entering a concurrence in the electronic document management system folder, an assignment must be made back to the originating program office.

(1) If a concurrence, or communication regarding the concurrence, is not received after 2 work days, concurrence is assumed. Folders are not held for overdue concurrences.

(2) Concurring offices must resolve content issues with the responsible program office. Program offices should refer substantial (content) questions or concerns to the correspondence liaison in the originating program office for resolution.

(3) Issues must be addressed and responded to within 2 work days.

f. The originating program office finalizes the letter, assembles a folder, and brings it to 101B for presentation at VHA mail call.

g. Upon signature or approval, 101B dispatches the correspondence if it is for the signature of the Under Secretary for Health, or forwards it to 001B if it is for the signature of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. If questions are raised at mail call, 101B may consult with the correspondence liaison.

ATTACHMENT B

EXPLANATION OF TERMS

1. High Priority Correspondence. High Priority Correspondence is:

a. Congressional correspondence for the signatures of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and the Under Secretary for Health.

b. Other correspondence for the signatures of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and the Under Secretary for Health.

2. Timeliness and Quality. Program offices are given up to 6 work days to prepare and submit a final draft to the Office of Executive Correspondence (101B) for high-priority correspondence. All issues are to be fully addressed. The necessary coordination and resolution of controversial issues should be reconciled prior to the draft being sent to 101B.

3. Electronic Document Management System. The electronic document management system is the tracking system that must be used by program offices to stay current on the status of each folder.

4. Concurrences. Upon completion of a final draft, the originating program office determines the concurrences that are needed and makes assignments to the appropriate program offices for review and concurrence. Program offices have 2 work days to concur on high-priority correspondence. If a concurrence, or communication regarding the concurrence, is not received within this time, concurrence will be assumed and the response will be finalized for signature.

5. Correspondence Assignments. Correspondence is assigned to a program office based on the predominant issue in the incoming letter. However, if a program office receives correspondence which clearly should be answered more appropriately by another office (s), the initial program office must coordinate the transfer and obtain acceptance of the assignment by the other program office(s) before reassignment is made.

a. Reassignments may be requested by contacting 101B in person or by email.

b. This reassignment must be done within 1 work day.

c. When there are multiple, discrete issues presented requiring distinct responses from various program offices, 101B takes the lead in making simultaneous assignments to the appropriate program offices to coordinate the response.

6. Correspondence Liaison. A correspondence liaison must be designated by each Chief Officer to manage correspondence in the program office and to work closely with 101B on issues relating to correspondence management, review, and control. Liaisons are to be designated in each program office.

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7. Dispatching Signed Correspondence. Correspondence for the signature or concurrence of the Under Secretary for Health or the Deputy Under Secretary for Health must be dated and dispatched by 101B. Correspondence assigned for other signature levels within VHA typically are signed and dispatched by the responsible action office and a file copy provided to 101B. Correspondence for the Secretary of Veterans Affairs or the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs' signature is dispatched by 001B.

8. Interims. Program offices must review assignments immediately to determine if an interim response is needed. Interim responses are needed when it is obvious that a reply cannot be prepared within the assigned timeframe. If an interim response is needed, it is to be prepared within 1 work day of the assignment. If there is uncertainty about whether an interim response is necessary, one should be written to prevent an assignment from becoming overdue.

ATTACHMENT C

CORRESPONDENCE PRIORITY RULES (CPR)

RULES FOR ASSIGNING DUE DATES TO INCOMING CORRESPONDENCE

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has established the following protocol for establishing response due dates depending on the nature of the incoming correspondence, unless otherwise specified:

| <u>RESPONSE DUE</u> | <u>TYPE OF INCOMING CORRESPONDENCE</u> |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1. <u>7 Work days from receipt</u> | a. White House special referral; and b. Personal letter from key Congressional members involving mismanagement, malpractice, prohibited personnel action (e.g., Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), Whistleblowing), safety violations, or other serious allegation |
| 2. <u>14 Work days from receipt</u> | a. Intergovernmental, e.g., Office of Management and Budget (OMB), General Accountability Office (GAO), Congressional Budget Office (CBO), Office of Personnel Management (OPM), etc.; b. Veterans Service Organization(s) (VSOs); and c. Personal letter from key Congressional members involving issues not identified in the preceding. |
| 3. <u>15 Work days from receipt</u> | a. White House bulk mail; b. Case mail from Congressional members; and c. All other routine correspondence. |

NOTE: Contact 101B for additional information (202) 273-6280.