

June 25, 2012

VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION CORRESPONDENCE MANAGEMENT

1. PURPOSE: This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Directive provides policy concerning the management of correspondence within VHA. There are various types of correspondence, including: White House Mail, Congressional Case Mail, Veterans Service Organization Mail, Miscellaneous Mail and External Mail. This Directive applies only to correspondence and does not cover policy documents or other assignments made through the electronic document management system (EDMS). *NOTE: The present EDMS is known as VAIQ.*

2. BACKGROUND: The quality of correspondence prepared in VHA reflects directly on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the services VA provides. As a result, it is expected that correspondence will be handled promptly and that requested information will be provided in a courteous, compassionate manner that mirrors customer-service orientation.

- a. Attachment A provides the method for processing correspondence in VHA.
- b. Attachment B provides an explanation of terms.
- c. Attachment C provides correspondence priority rules and details regarding rules for assigning this correspondence.

3. POLICY: It is VHA policy that all correspondence, including that for the signature of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, VA Chief of Staff and VHA Leadership (see subpar. 4a) must conform to the VA Correspondence Guidelines.

4. ACTION

a. **Under Secretary for Health.** The Under Secretary for Health is responsible for ensuring that VHA Senior Leadership, to include: VHA Chief of Staff (10B), the Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health (10A), the Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management (10N), the Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Policy and Services (10P) and VHA Chief Officers, have effective correspondence programs in place within their functional areas and follow the appropriate guidelines which provide instructions on how to prepare: letters; memoranda; VA Form 4265, Concurrence and Summary Sheet; VA Form 0907, Strategic Communications Review; as well as other correspondence documents. This guidance can be found on the Office of Executive Secretary's (ES) Web site located at: <http://vaww.execsec.va.gov/> as well as the Office of Executive Correspondence Web site located at: <http://vaww.va.gov/com/correspond>. *NOTE: These are internal VA and VHA Web sites not available to the public.*

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b. **VHA Office of Executive Correspondence (10B1)**. The VHA Office of Executive Correspondence (10B1) is responsible for overseeing the correspondence process from VHA's receipt until signed and dispatched. 10B1 is also responsible for conducting the Strategic Communications Review meeting on a weekly basis.

(1) **10B1 Correspondence Management Staff**. 10B1's Correspondence Management Staff is responsible for:

- (a) Reviewing initial correspondence assignments to VHA;
- (b) Assigning, monitoring and closing miscellaneous, Congressional case mail and White House correspondence assigned to program offices or field facilities;
- (c) Tracking VHA's correspondence workload on a daily basis;
- (d) Dispatching signed correspondence;
- (e) Facilitating extension requests from VHA program offices; and
- (f) Closing VHA assignments and folders for the Under Secretary for Health's signature.

(2) **10B1 Executive Reviewers**. 10B1 Executive Reviewers are responsible for:

- (a) Reviewing final drafts submitted by 10A, 10B, 10N, 10P.

1. If package is incomplete or requires major revisions, 10B1 will work with 10A, 10B, 10N, 10P to resolve the issue(s).

2. Once revised, 10B1 will continue processing the final package.

- (b) Ensuring that all appropriate concurrences are documented in the final package.

(c) Ensuring assignments are finalized for the signatures of VA and VHA Senior Leadership (see subpar. 4a).

(d) Attending VHA mail call to obtain the signature or concurrence of the Under Secretary for Health.

1. Being prepared to effectively and succinctly summarize the documents to be signed, anticipate questions, and have all folders signature ready.

2. If package requires edits, or additional information, 10B1 will revise, or if necessary, return the folder to 10A, 10B, 10N, or 10P for revision.

3. Once revision(s) are complete, the package is returned to 10B1 for mail call and VHA approval.

(e) Ensuring that VHA responds to ES fast track items in an expeditious manner.

(f) Attending VA ES mail call (when needed) to support the subject matter expert (SME) and ensuring that any due outs are accomplished timely.

(g) Providing guidance on correspondence issues;

(h) Serving as the primary point of contact with other VA elements on correspondence management issues.

(i) Providing formal and informal correspondence training for VHA.

d. **VHA Senior Leadership.** VHA Senior Leadership is responsible for:

(1) Ensuring that all correspondence for the signature of VA and VHA leadership (see par. 3) is placed in the EDMS. Sensitive items placed in the EDMS must be marked as sensitive.

(2) Designating a correspondence liaison and a backup who is responsible for the management of correspondence within each program office.

(3) Reviewing all assignments daily to ensure assignments are correct. If a document needs to be reassigned to another program office, reassignments must be requested within 1 work day.

(4) Ensuring there are designees who can clear documents each workday to prevent delays.

(5) Working with 10B1 to provide a final draft that is responsive to the incoming correspondence, timely, factually correct, and consistent with VHA and Departmental policy.

(6) Obtaining and monitoring 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, if designated the lead program office for drafting the response.

(7) Concurring on correspondence assigned within 2 work days, unless an extension is granted by the lead program office.

(8) Updating the EDMS to reflect the current status of all correspondence assigned in their program areas.

(9) Monitoring correspondence for timeliness and completeness until it has been signed, if designated the lead program office for drafting the response. If there are follow-up actions noted in the signed response; the lead program office will track the actions until they are completed.

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(10) 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 of the Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health, the Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management, the Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Policy and Services or the VHA Chief Officer level. When 10B1 assigns correspondence for these signature levels, the program office bears full responsibility for:

- (a) Reviewing all assignments daily to ensure the assignment is correct;
- (b) Preparing a complete and timely response;
- (c) Signing and dispatching the signed response by the assigned due date;
- (d) Forwarding a copy of the signed response to 10B1 in the EDMS for information;
- (e) Tracking in the EDMS; and
- (f) Closing the folder.

5. REFERENCES: None.

6. FOLLOW-UP RESPONSIBILITY: The Director, Office of Executive Correspondence (10B1), is responsible for the contents of this Directive. Questions may be directed to (202) 461-7299.

7. RESCISSION: VHA Directive 2007-029 is rescinded. This VHA Directive expires June 30, 2017.

Robert A. Petzel, M.D.
Under Secretary for Health

Attachments

DISTRIBUTION: E-mailed to the VHA Publications Distribution List 6/25/2012

ATTACHMENT A

VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION (VHA) CORRESPONDENCE
PROCESSING

VHA correspondence processing emphasizes accountability, cooperation, and progress toward attainment of the goal of zero overdue correspondence. The process for correspondence prepared for the signatures of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and VHA leadership is as follows:

1. An incoming letter is received in 10B1, either from the Office of the Executive Secretary (ES) (001B) or from other sources, and is entered into the electronic document management system (EDMS) and assigned to an appropriate lead program office(s) to prepare a draft response.

a. Lead program offices have 6 work days to prepare a final draft for Committee Chairs (Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, House Veterans Affairs Committee, Senate Appropriations Committee, House Appropriations Committee) unless the due date is shortened because of the sensitivity of an issue. For responses to other members, lead program offices have 15 days to prepare a final draft.

b. When there are multiple, discrete issues presented requiring distinct responses from various program offices, 10B1 will assist the lead program office with collaborating with other program offices to coordinate and finalize the response.

c. Due dates for other correspondence are established based on the type of correspondence (see Att. C).

2. Program offices identified as the lead program offices must review assignments immediately to determine if an interim response is needed for the signature of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Affairs Chief of Staff, or the Under Secretary for Health. If an interim is needed, the lead program office needs to prepare the interim within 1 work day of the assignment. *NOTE: The 10B1 liaison needs to be contacted if there is uncertainty about whether an interim response is needed.*

3. Requests for extension must be made within 1 work day of receipt of the assignment.

4. Informal external and internal VHA consultations are important steps in preparing the final draft that is assigned to 10B1; they are as follows:

a. The lead program office develops a final draft response addressing each of the issues raised in the incoming letter within the stated timeframe. VA Form 0907, VA Strategic Communication Review Form, needs to be prepared for all packages signed by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. VA Form 4265, Concurrence and Summary Sheet, needs to be prepared for all packages signed by the Under Secretary for Health. This response is the official VHA position and must be fully coordinated.

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b. The lead program office enters the draft response, as well as the appropriate VA forms and all pertinent background information into the EDMS and sends the response through appropriate internal and external channels for concurrence. The lead program office must obtain concurrence from their appropriate leadership (10A, 10B, 10N, 10P) before an assignment is made to 10B1.

5. When 10B1 receives a review assignment, the 10B1 staff review, edit, and may re-format the letter (and the fact sheet and VA Form 0907, if required), in coordination with the lead program office.

a. If a draft response has not fully addressed all the issues in the incoming letter, 10B1 staff will contact the appropriate correspondence liaison, or alternate, for clarification or additional information. The correspondence liaison must ensure that 10B1 has all the information necessary to fully address all issues.

b. Both 10B1 and program office staff need to resolve a question or concern with a phone call or other informal means of communication when practical.

6. Concurring offices are given 2 work days to concur on correspondence assigned to them by another program office. After entering a concurrence in the EDMS, an assignment must be made back to the requesting program office.

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

b. Concurring offices must resolve content issues with the lead program office. Concurring offices need to refer substantial (content) questions or concerns to the correspondence liaison in the lead program office for resolution.

c. Issues must be addressed and responded to within 2 work days.

7. The lead program office finalizes the letter, assembles a folder, and brings it to 10B1 for final review and presentation at VHA mail call once 10A, 10B, 10N, or 10P senior leadership have approved.

8. Upon signature or approval, 10B1 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, 10B1 will consult with the appropriate correspondence liaison.

ATTACHMENT B

EXPLANATION OF TERMS

- 1. Concurrences.** Upon completion of a final draft, the lead program office determines the concurrences that are needed and makes assignments to the appropriate concurring program offices for review and concurrence. Concurring offices have 2 work days to concur on 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.
- 2. Concurring Office.** A concurring office(s) has specific expertise on a portion of what is contained in a draft response. A concurring office is responsible for concurring, or providing comments, on a draft response within 2 work days.
- 3. Correspondence Assignments.** Correspondence is assigned to a lead program office based on the predominant issue in the incoming letter. However, if a program office is designated as a lead program office for correspondence, which clearly should be answered more appropriately by another office (s), the initial lead program office must coordinate the transfer and obtain acceptance of the assignment by another program office(s) before reassignment is made.
- 4. Correspondence Liaison.** Each Chief Officer must designate a correspondence liaison who is to manage correspondence in the program office and work closely with 10B1 on issues relating to correspondence management, review, and control.
- 5. 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 10B1. Correspondence assigned for other signature levels within VHA typically are signed and dispatched by the responsible action office and a file copy provided to 10B1. Correspondence for the Secretary of Veterans Affairs or the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs' signature is dispatched by 001B.
- 6. Electronic Document Management System (EDMS).** The EDMS is the tracking system that must be used by program offices to stay current on the status of each folder.
- 7. Interims.** Lead 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. Program offices need to contact the 10B1 liaison if there is uncertainty about whether an interim response is needed.
- 8. Office of Executive Correspondence.** The VHA Office of Executive Correspondence (10B1) is responsible for correspondence administration, including the efficiency of VHA correspondence processing.
- 9. Lead Program Office.** The lead program office (Assistant Deputy Under Secretary or Chief Officer), which has knowledge of concerns raised in incoming correspondence, takes the lead in

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developing a response. The lead program office is responsible for providing 10B1 with a final draft that fully responds to incoming correspondence in a timely and effective manner. As needed, the lead program office collaborates with other program offices to develop a final response.

10. Timeliness and Quality. Lead program offices are given 6 work days to prepare and submit a final draft to the Office of Executive Correspondence (10B1) for high-priority correspondence. All issues are to be fully addressed. The necessary coordination and resolution of controversial issues need to be reconciled prior to the draft being sent to 10B1.

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:

TYPE OF INCOMING CORRESPONDENCE	RESPONSE DUE
A. Committee Members – Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee (SVAC), House Veterans’ Affairs Committee (HVAC), Senate Appropriations Committee (SAC), House Appropriations Committee (HAC).	<u>6 Work days from receipt</u>
B. Other Members.	<u>15 work days from receipt</u>
C. White House special referral; personal letter from key Congressional members involving mismanagement, malpractice, prohibited personnel action (e.g., Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), Whistleblowing), safety violations, or other serious allegations.	<u>7 Work days from receipt</u>
D. Intergovernmental, e.g., Office of Management and Budget (OMB), General Accountability Office (GAO), Congressional Budget Office, Office of Personnel Management (OPM), etc., to include: a. Letters from Veterans Service Organizations; b. Time Sensitive letter from key Congressional members involving issues not identified in the preceding.	<u>14 Work days from receipt</u>
E. White House bulk mail.	<u>15 Work days from receipt</u>
F. Case mail from Congressional members; and all other routine correspondence.	<u>30 Work days from receipt</u>