

Section 11.

RFW at the St. Petersburg RO

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Getting There. It was 82 degrees by noon. The early morning warmed. The highway lane changed repeatedly through and south out of Tampa Bay and across the seven mile bridge toward St. Petersburg. The concrete lane crisscrossed itself, rose above Saint Pete, framed the skyline and the gulf beyond, then exited at 35 mph, from average speeds of 70's, by dropping into the inner city at 5th street. Fifth street was Resort Town. Fourth, Third, Second was business, tall buildings downtown. South on 2nd Street. No, turn left, at 2nd Ave So to the parking lot opening, turn left into the lot, turn left into a slot. Stop the engine. Walk toward the Federal Building. Today's verdant vegetation, shadowless sunshine and high humidity, was exchanged for the air-cooled lobby. The three day St. Petersburg site visit had begun.

The Saint Petersburg VA Regional Office was a busy organization. Staff members in the seven story building responded to the information needs of Florida's 1,698,000 statewide and walk-in veterans. The Regional Office occupied a downtown General Services Administration-owned building for 28 years, anticipating a facility move to the Bay Pines area where a new facility was being completed to combine the region's Veterans Benefits Administration Regional Office and Veteran Hospital Administration missions.

The St. Petersburg Regional Office was the second largest staffed of the 58 ROs (exceeded only by the Philadelphia RO and Insurance Center). It had 12 out-based offices throughout Florida to serve veterans who could not come to the Saint Petersburg facility. A staff of 559 FTE was employed by the St. Petersburg RO. On-site division operations included: Adjudication (210 employees), Loan Guaranty (90), Veterans Services (100), Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling (29), Finance (40) Administrative (40) and Information Resources Management

(12 employees). As with other ROs, service organization representatives attached included: Florida Department of Veterans Affairs, AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Station correspondence in FY96 amounted to 2,668,752 pieces of incoming mail and 861,628 pieces of outgoing mail. The Veterans Services Division averaged 6,555 personal interviews and 50,243 telephone interviews monthly in FY 96. An RO information packet indicated that “due to Armed Forces downsizing and other outside forces, all VBA Adjudication divisions have experienced some increase in workload, but the continuing migration of Americans to the sunbelt in search of jobs has caused a disproportionate increase in St. Petersburg’s workload. This division handled more claims than any other in the nation.”¹

Inquiries. Walk-in veterans bringing inquiries to the Regional Office came to the first floor Veteran Services Division room for a face-to-face visit with a Veteran Services Counselor. Some were on a first name basis with the counselors and support staff, friendly, having time to stop and chat. This morning, wearing hats and shirts touting their military unit or ship they did not distinguish me from the counseling staff and asked me “When did you start here?” And, “I’m Fred’s wife . . . that’s Fred sitting over there. We have a question.” My VSD staff host directed Fred’s wife to an available counselor. As I left the room I hear another man ask a counter staffer, “Remember me? I’m the guy that asks all the questions.” They both laughed.

Many other veterans have telephoned or wrote to the Regional Office that day. Elsewhere, in all the building’s divisions, veteran information needs were being listened to or read about in letters. Inquiries from previous days that took longer than the time required for one interaction were still being acted on today. This was a place where benefits-related questions got answered, questions like “Can I get a flag and an honor guard for my Dad’s funeral?”--as well as questions on topics: disability compensation, pensions, automobile allowances, specially adaptive housing, special clothing

¹ St. Petersburg VBA Regional Office Information Packet, 1997.

allowances, survivors' claims for death compensation; educational assistance, school attendance approvals; rehabilitation outreach, motivation, evaluation, counseling, and training; properties' appraisals to establish their values, life insurance underwriting functions, life and death insurance claim awards, fiduciary activities; supervising the construction of new residential properties; and the establishing of veteran eligibility for each program's participation.

A VBA communication exchange often began with a veteran making an inquiry about his or her benefit situation. Walk-in and telephone interactions could lead to a quickly filled information request for easily answered questions. A letter telling the veteran how to accomplish the task might have been the response. Claim-based questions and other complex inquiries were sent to the appropriate claim-topic-answering division.

Reader Focused Writing Initiative Origin. In early 1994, a Task Force on Simplified Communication recommended the creation of an initiative to address renewed efforts to produce better communications between veterans and VBA staffers throughout the nation. The initiative "Reader Focused Writing," and its "Tools Course," was designed upon the long history of VA "clearer communications" efforts. They emphasized the use of common sense when writing letters to veterans and other more recent writing improvement programs. The Task Force members proposed a plan for VBA-wide communication improvement through, in part, RFW agency-wide training.

According to an introduction by Under Secretary Vogel: "The Tools course is not simply about improving writing skills. You've probably had plenty of those types of courses. The course will explore the sound principles of technical communication that are the basis of Reader-Focused Writing. This is something previous VA writing courses have not offered. It's a new experience for most of us."²

VBA Central Office RFW training intentions nationwide were: to complete two pilots, then deliver the course in two-hour sessions two or three days each week for

² Under Secretary Vogel letter, June 3, 1996.

three weeks, for a total of seven sessions. Then to have a follow-up two-hour session eight weeks later. "We plan to follow this schedule for approximately two years to reach employees at all Regional Offices."³

RO Training. The Saint Petersburg Regional Office staff began RFW training midsummer, 1996, first in June in support of Central Office directed pilot trainings, and continued with the first groups of regular trainings in September until the RFW training stopped in November, 1996. St. Petersburg RO participated in a first pilot RFW training program. A second pilot tasked St. Pete with training over two weeks, June 10-13, 17-18, and 20, 1996 from 1:-4:30 PM each day with ten trainees. There were seven class sessions in the initial core training, one per day. An August follow-up "refresher" session was rescheduled for September 5, 1996.⁴

St. Petersburg's nationwide course delivery training sessions via live broadcasts from the Washington, D.C. studio over the Veterans Broadcast Network (VBN) with on-site instructor assistance in the RO training room began on 9/9, 9/30, 10/16, 10/28 with trainees sitting at keypads interactive with the broadcast staff. An orientation session was held for supervisors. St. Petersburg employees who received the RFW Tools course were selected from employees who write free-text letters; who choose pattern letters and/or form letters, sometimes inserting a small amount of text, and review or edit letters other employees write.⁵ Fifty station employees were Reader Focused Writing trained.

RFW Trainees' Views. Six trainees individually interviewed at the station provided various perspectives on the impact of the previous years' RFW training on their work. These comments mentioned experience "before" RFW and "after," satisfactions, frustrations and thoughts about RFW as a way of communicating with veterans, training package quality, division differences in writing needs and voice/mail counseling combinations.

³ Attachment to Vogel letter, June 3, 1996.

⁴ St. Petersburg Regional Office Director Memo, August 21, 1996.

⁵ Attachment to Vogel letter, June 3, 1996, page 2.

Before RFW, “form letters” or computer letter sections that I used were not always understandable. There were lots of telephone calls [causing] rework.

My greatest satisfaction in letter preparation is that if I can understand the letter, I can get the answer right to the veteran. If the veteran is asking for basic information I can use RFW to send back a clear directional letter. No call-ins from vets saying that they didn't understand my letter! No rework!

My frustrations are in applying the course [RFW Tools Training course] to the job. [They show us about better communication but not how to fit the course to our exact jobs.]

RFW was a good program.

RFW gives me a mindset of addressing the [writing] issues and the veteran's needs. In writing courses before RFW we got lots of content matters. But with the idea of needs: I now read a letter 4 or 5 times through as research. I anticipate what I believe the veteran did or did not say. And I give them a more accurate letter. A thorough answer and not only what they want to hear.

RFW training gave me a way to think about responding to our customers--veterans. (Handing me a letter from an inches thick paper-filled file representing years of written communications between a veteran and various Veterans Benefits Administration staffers, the RFW trainee continued). Here is an example of a letter written in the RFW format. This way of asking for veteran information allows me a very direct way of asking for and receiving information required by us, information with which to make a benefits decision and complete a claim about this veteran's benefits. I have 100% return of information for my RFW-formatted requests.

These six interviewees responded in our survey of 38 St. Petersburg Regional Office trainees about training package quality:

- 6 of these 6 were among the group's 100% who said RFW instruction was well organized.
- 6 of these 6 were among the group's 97% who said that they learned much about better letter preparation.

- 5 of these 6 were among the group's 82% who said that the quality of training videos and materials was high.
- 5 of these 6 were among the group's 89% who said that the room environment during training was high.
- 5 of the 6 were among the group's 87% who said the contribution of their on-site instructor(s) were high.
- 6 of the 6 were among the group's 92% who said they have applied RFW ideas in their VBA work.

The trainees acknowledged that divisional writing needs differed for the use of the RFW format use. RFW style could be incorporated in any letter leaving the station. Even legalistic mandated paragraphs can be integrated within a letter carrying the directness of RFW style. Some (not adjudicators) said that the RFW style was more useful in the adjudication or loan guaranty division whether the letter recipient was a non-veteran or a veteran. In terms of getting better letters back to veterans, one trainee said that, in their work division, there was "limited composition" opportunity. "I can't chunk and bullet . . . But I can make it clearer," for example, in a "memo for the file." Most trainees suggested that in none of the divisions would there be universal support for RFW use. Supervisor support was highest from those who appreciated the RFW style and now were willing to incorporate the style in supervised letter writing. One writer mentioned that they had had a compliment on a clearer communication from a veteran, saying "The veteran made and sent me a certificate [of appreciation]."

Voice and mail counseling were combined in some veteran communications. Several trainees suggested that they too had the experience of this writer, who said,

It takes special skills on the telephone or when reading a letter to find out what they want to know if it is not clear the first time. If they are with you in a face-to-face interview you can ask for clarity several times or in different ways. Reading a letter you have to think about what they are asking about in writing and what they might mean otherwise. Sometimes when I am working with a letter I pick up the phone and call the veteran to better understand their request.

RFW Trainees' Recommendations. RFW trainees interviewed at this station made recommendations for future training for better communication with veterans.

Before RFW training:

Provide training about "better writing per se."

During RFW Training sessions (now 10 persons per session):

Train everyone. [repeated]

Train all letter writers and their supervisors.

Train not only in content but how we say it.

Train supervisors first. [repeated]

Train everyone in RFW at the same time.

Train all at once so we can have the same knowledge about the new way they want letters made.

Train together the more and less content-experienced staffers.

After RFW training:

Provide refresher training for every RFW trained person.

Administrator Views. Administrators commented on the St. Petersburg RFW training to the Southern Area Office, that St. Petersburg had planned for all the writers in the organization to have Reader Focused Writing training. One hundred ninety-six people in the organization were identified to receive training over a long term period. Ten people were trained in Writing for Real People, which enabled them to work in teams, write clear and understandable letters, and protocol test those letters. Regional Office employees were in the initial training of Reader Focused Writing, and subsequently participated in four of the eight regular sessions, training a total of 50 people using four on-site instructors.

Regional Office reorganization plans require customer service measures to obtain feedback about writing issues.

Future plans, in May, 1997, included a training administrator to determine the needs of the organization, and the training appropriate to meet those needs, which may be different than training all the people identified originally.⁶

⁶ Wurschmidt, May 2, 1997.