

Section 13.

## **RFW at the Baltimore RO**

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**Postcard home.** Lombard Street was still wet from last night's rainstorm. A cool wind came up the steep street from the lower inner harbor. The ceaseless wind turned each corner climbing westward through the center city; trees bending, dropping rain. Construction surrounding the Fallon Federal Building made it hard to know where to enter the building. I asked a person who had stopped at the street crossing with me. We looked up at the building. She didn't work there but thought that if I walked around to a north side plaza I could find my way to enter through a detour of wooden framed plywood ramps. We crossed the wide, many laned one-way street the "Bal'more Way." Wait for cars to your left to be so few and timed such that you can walk part way, then all the way across the street before another vehicle starts toward you. I stopped beside the North Plaza fountain, stood among statuary and looked up at the top of the cloud-draped building. Few lights were on in the Fallon building's fourteen stories' windows. Grey clouds, blocking any morning sunshine, still hung low over the city. Guards drinking coffee from styrofoam cups watched the normal morning flow of badged employees enter the building. Startled by my standing still in front of them, one asked, "Who are you here to see?" "VBA Regional Office Director, please," I said. Two guards signed me in for a building visit.

**RO Description.** The Baltimore Regional Office is in the GSA's G. H. Fallon Federal Building at 31 Hopkins Plaza in downtown Baltimore, Maryland. Inside the federal building, the maintenance staff displayed elevator rack handouts to assure employees that the "flooded" plaza outside is only a test of recently applied waterproofing materials; that the building will be maintained at positive pressure and optional temperatures "even though the air handling units occasionally experience operational deficiencies;" and, that "work is proceeding as scheduled on

the upper floors where occupancy is planned to begin in late fall 1997.”<sup>1</sup> I expected to be safe here.

As I rode the up-escalator to the second floor, turned corners and walked down a public school-like tiled hallway to the Director’s Office suite, I reminded myself what I had read before the visit: the VBA Eastern Area’s Baltimore Regional Office is under the direction of a director and an assistant director, with over one hundred staff members employed in roles of human resources liaison, management analyst, automated data processing staff, support services, adjudication, loan guaranty, vocational rehabilitation and counseling, and veterans services personnel. I looked forward to meeting them.

Inside, I met the Assistant Director, got introductions with the Director and was offered any facilities tour that I felt would help me understand the Regional Office’s organization and enacted mission. I asked for a tour of the building the same way that an incoming letter would travel, from the mail room to its final destination on a decision maker’s desk. We walked through each division and visited with the on-duty staff.

The Baltimore VA Regional Office staff was friendly and hard at work wherever I passed them in the building. These civil servants were responding to the information needs of Maryland veterans statewide--21 of 23 counties--and Baltimore City. (Montgomery and Prince Georges Counties are served by the Washington, D.C. Regional Office.) Throughout the tour I met division chiefs, employees including Reader Focused Writing program trainees, and customer veterans. During a tour break, when my guide stepped aside due to business, I read,

The regional office is a field station which grants benefits and services provided by law for veterans, their dependents, and beneficiaries within an assigned territory; furnishes information regarding VA benefits and services; adjudicates claims and makes awards for disability compensation and pension; determines eligibility for hospitalization; handles guardianship and fiduciary

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<sup>1</sup> A Fact Sheet on the G.H. Fallon Federal Building, General Service Administration, August 29, 1997.

matters and authorized legal proceedings; prescribes vocational rehabilitation; assists veterans in financing the purchase of reasonably priced homes at fair rates of interest; processes death claims and assists the veteran and his/her dependents or beneficiaries in exercising their right to additional benefits and services.<sup>2</sup>

Continuing our tour, we walked past the Service Organization Representatives' offices housed in the Regional Office. Nearby, the mail room staff was busy with several mail drops and pick-ups each day since station correspondence in FY 1995 amounted to 250,750 pieces of received mail and 151,600 pieces of dispatched mail.

The FY 1995 workload included 27,743 claims processed by the adjudication division and over \$190,000,000 authorized in payments to beneficiaries. The Loan Guaranty Division issued 5,822 individual certificates of reasonable value, issued eligibility certificates for 6,537 veterans, guaranteed 5,891 home loans, acquired 392 properties, sold 422 properties, and had available for resale 205 properties. The Veterans Services Division completed 27,314 personal interviews, answered 118,665 telephone interviews, maintained security on the estates of 1,235 wards, conducted 713 field examinations, traveled 79,028 miles, and conducted 45 survey visits to schools. The Veterans Services Division averaged 6,555 personal interviews and 50,243 telephone interviews monthly in FY 96.<sup>3</sup>

Walk-in veterans who bring inquiries to the Regional Office come to the first floor Veteran Services Division room for a face-to-face visit with a Veterans Benefits Counselor. The veterans that I met here today treated me like one of them. As I stood near the counter, one veteran said to me: "No, no. Here, you go in line. You in the Gulf?" "No," I said, "Not in line. I'm taking a tour but I stopped to meet a real veteran." "Me? W2, that's me." "Tell me, how good are the services here for you?" "They treat me well here! No complaints!" Each day tens of other veteran inquiries are dealt with by this Regional Office. All divisions' staff members work as interactively as possible to answer veteran customer questions,

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<sup>2</sup> Baltimore Regional Office Presentation Packet (for FY 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

whether the veteran is making a short-time, information-only or a multilayered inquiry about his or her benefit situation.

**RO Training.** In 1995, the Simplified Communication Task Force recommended the creation of an RFW initiative and a training “Tools Course” to address renewed efforts to produce better communications between veterans and VBA staffers.<sup>4</sup> The Baltimore Regional Office RFW training began midsummer, 1996--one of the first in support of Central Office directed two pilot trainings--and later with the first groups of regular trainings in September until training stopped in November, 1996. The Baltimore Regional Office participated in a first pilot RFW training program with seven trainees and an on-site instructor. In a second pilot, another on-site instructor trained five persons. There were seven class sessions in the initial core training, one per day, plus an August follow-up “refresher” session.

Baltimore’s nationwide course delivery training sessions were 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. Sessions were on 10/16 - 10/24 (6 trainees) and 10/28 - 11/8 (6 trainees) with on-site trainees watching television monitors and using interactive keypads with VBN training staff miles and miles away. Baltimore employees who received the RFW Tools course were said to be selected from employees who write free-text letters or who choose pattern letters and/or form letters, sometimes inserting a small amount of text, and review or edit letters other employees write.<sup>5</sup> To date, twenty four out of nearly one hundred station employees had been trained in Reader-Focused Writing.

**Trainee Group Survey.** In a group survey about RFW training issues, the 23 station RFW trainees indicated:

- Before becoming RFW trainees, nine of the 23 had participated in formal writing improvement courses. Those nine had participated in efforts to improve VBA letter writing before RFW and eight of these persons had made

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<sup>4</sup> Under Secretary Vogel letter, June 3, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Attachment to Under Secretary Vogel letter.

the earlier efforts partly on their own. Only three had exchanged practice writings with other VBA people. All trainees surveyed believed that quality of letters to veterans is an important issue and that VBA does not make too much of a fuss about improving letter writing.

- After RFW training, 22 of 23 trainees said that the RFW approach made sense to them and that it is good for writers to try to orient more to veteran's needs. None of the trainees objected to RFW training. Fifteen trainees indicated that they spent on average 58 hours per year developing RFW communication skills. The trainees believed that five hours per month should be allotted for in-service training about VBA communication. These 18 respondents now are able to spend five hours per month and believed that seven hours per month, per person, should be spent on skill upgrading. Nineteen trainees said that they believed the intended implementation is RFW is practical.

One trainee expressed this concern about future needs for letters assembly either from model paragraphs or individually tailored replies:

Since I have taken the course, I have not had time to really utilize the skills learned. I have continued to rely on prepared letter formats already in the system because of workload demands. I honestly feel that RFW does allow the DVA a way of communicating with our broad educational range of customers in a more effective manner. However, we need to have time to practice and enhance the basic skills given us.

Twelve of 15 persons said that the Regional Office infrastructure had not been changed to accommodate RFW training. For example, few rewards existed for better letters and little added opportunities for staff exchange of writings to support RFW. "Not enough time is given to allow more RFW work to conform to many form letters. After training is over usually it's forgotten."

The surveyed group of 23 noted training results that were visible to them: eighteen saw examples of improved writing; nine believed that staff members have set higher priorities on good writing; six said that letters are simpler to read but complex topics are avoided; four believed the number of letters returned for rewriting has diminished; three people

reported that supervisors said that better letters were going out; few (two) said that headings and white space are more important than content; only one person believed that letters take longer to write, that production is down. Some trainees thought that during training sessions they “Often had some form of technical equipment problem.” And one felt: “that faxing to another site was impractical.”

**Trainee Interviews.** Six trainees individually interviewed at the station had these perspectives on the impact of the RFW training on their work. These comments include satisfactions, frustrations, institutional training support and thoughts about RFW as a way of communicating with veterans. One person shared other trainees views of in letter preparation: satisfaction. “We are understood;” “Better letters mean fewer inquiries and less rework to rephrase what was already said--not in RFW.” Others said, “The [RFW] letter format is clear.” “Letter clarity is better;” and, “The letter is doing its job.”

Among shared frustrations were thoughts about all-organization training support and timeliness: “My RFW-related frustration is that I write a good RFW letter and my supervisor changes the letter. There appears to be resistance to RFW at upper levels [outside the RO].” For some individuals at the Central Office level, “more support needed [for RFW daily] use.” For them, “. . . only now are RFW documents mapped.” For others, “Central Office did not ‘walk the talk;” and, “I wonder if this is just another writing initiative?”

These six interviewees had responded along with all 23 Regional Office RFW trainees about training package quality:

- 6 of these 6 were among the group’s 91% who said RFW instruction was well organized.
- 6 of these 6 were among the group’s 83% who said that they learned much about better letter preparation.
- 5 of these 6 were among the group’s 83% who said that the quality of training videos and materials was high.
- 5 of these 6 were among the group’s 87% who said that the room environment during training was high.
- 6 of the 6 were among the group’s 91% who said the contribution of their on-site instructor(s) were high.

- 6 of the 6 were among the group's 96% who said they have applied RFW ideas in their VBA work.

Trainees noted that throughout work line divisions RFW style may be incorporated in any letter leaving the station. Although some trainees believed that the RFW style might be more useful in the divisions where legal issues were more evident than in their work areas, they believed that even complex matters that the veteran needs to know could be adequately handled in the RFW format. One trainee shrugged and said: "A person can handle a complex issue by breaking [letter content] down into subparts."

Voice and mail counseling were strengthened when combined in preparing veteran communications. "First I telephone most veterans. Then, I follow-up in writing." In terms of getting better letters back to veterans, one trainee said the better "letters are done on a personal level towards veterans needs and concerns." Another: "I use the RFW style of asking-answering, asking-answering questions. I search for hidden questions in a veteran's letter. I read between the lines. I read, interpret and *then* return letters."

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

Should provide training about basic English courses and grammar.

Need more general courses [in communication].

Need more basic English courses.

Need to focus on the 1:1 interaction that happens between two people, that's how communication works.

During RFW training sessions:

Train everyone.

Train all VBA employees.

More staff should be in RFW. Until all do [receive training], conflicting writing exists.

All management should have been trained first. Correspondence does go through the supervisor.

**After RFW Training:**

Provide refresher training for every RFW trained person.

Refresher [writing] courses are needed.

We need to be encouraged . . . [to use RFW] . . . permission to do so . . . expectation to do so . . .

**Administrator Reports.** Area administrators compiled trainee and training staff comments about RFW training:

. . . it is worthwhile to improve written communications; participants believed that the Tools Course was too long suggesting that time spent on individual exercises could be reduced in turn shortening the overall length of the course; shortened training periods would allow the individual participants and station management to be more likely to utilize and benefit from the material provided; and that satellite broadcast of the training was a very effective method of delivery.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lois Mittelstaedt memorandum to Director, Executive Communications Staff from Eastern Area Acting Director T. M. Lastowka, May 5, 1997