

Section 14.

RFW at the Denver RO

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Following the on-site instructor, Jan Anderson,¹ during an initial tour of the Denver Regional Office, I was bewildered. The building from the outside was curved but inside all was straight. After a bit, I realized the hallways divided the floors asymmetrically. One hundred and eighty-seven employees of the VBA worked in the two-year old building. The guarded entrance with a metal detector was on the second floor. The Veterans Service Division was just past the entrance. The basement had supporting departments like the mail room and a printing office as well as the several large training rooms. The third floor was the Loan Department and internal Finance Department. The Adjudication Department occupied all of the fourth floor. The director's office was on the fifth floor. The Denver VARO consisted only of the VBA and servicing offices (i.e., DAV).

The Adjudication Officer, Raymond Boor, told me that his department had processed 3,303 claims in August, 1997 and that was less than earlier this year. The Loan Department had acquired all or part of the work from eight regional offices and would get work from two more soon, then to have the "full complement." The Denver Regional Office appeared to be a busy station.

The elevator operated on a delay, the doors closing after a longer time period than common. It was explained to me that the elevators were timed to accommodate visitors and employees with disabilities. Although a big and bustling place, this type of personal consideration seemed the *modus operandi*. On the final day of my visit, I scoured the building for trainees. My goal was to find the 27 who missed filling in the small identification information at the top of the survey. Armed with donut holes in the wee hours of the working day, I found most of them. Some already at work, some gathered in

¹ I thank Jan Anderson for her facilitation of my visit. I am also grateful to the Denver director and the many staff members assisting in my visit.

small groups greeting each other as another day began, each of them friendly and willing to provide the missing information.

Before arriving at Denver, I had heard the RO had an active union. In the break room a large bulletin board was dedicated to the union and the union stewards were listed on a bulletin board in Veterans Service Division. The American Federation of Government Employees maintained an office on the third floor.

Defining RFW at Denver

RFW training was held in basement training rooms, separated by removable walls, the room was large and tables were set up. Denver participated in seven out of the eight RFW classes held in the Fall of 1996. Jan Anderson, now stationed in the work-study part of Veterans Service Division, was the on-site instructor for all seven courses and all but one class. A former teacher she said she enjoyed teaching RFW. Excluding her,² 66 people were trained at Denver.

At Denver, the Director participated in the course as a “student.”³ Catherine Smith appeared to fully endorse both the course and the RFW approach through action and word. Unanimously, the managers I spoke with supported RFW stating that it was a good program.

Sixty-one of the trainees at Denver completed and returned our ten-minute survey. Almost half of them were from Adjudication, most of the others from Loan Guaranty or Veterans Services Division. The median amount of time these 61 trainees spent writing letters to veterans was estimated at 30%. All 61 agreed that the quality of letters to veterans was an important issue and that it was good for writers to try to orient more to the veteran’s needs. Seventy percent checked the quality of RFW videos and materials as high.

Early in the visit, Anderson articulated the opinion that “Melodee Mercer should not be replaced as the instructor. She was the best.” Anderson made available the informal

² Jan Anderson was trained in Washington, DC at the on-site instructor training in August of 1996.

³ At Denver, the trainees in RFW were referred to as students.

feedback she collected at the end of each class to our evaluation team. Several of the trainees endorsed the high opinion of Mercer in their comments. However 21 of the 34 trainees who submitted feedback indicated the RFW Tools course was too long.

Composing Letters or Applying Principles?

During my tour on the first day, Anderson and I pass rows and rows of pink and beige knobby burlap cubicle-dividers. Peeking inside, I see photos and plants decorating workstations of computers and shelves of references. On the third floor in Loan Guaranty, we stop at a cubicle to speak with a trainee of RFW. Teri Campbell⁴ is an All-American beauty, personable, the kind of person who was picked early for teams in grade school. She says, "The course was really good but --" [and playfully covering Anderson's ears] she confides in a mock whisper, "I don't have the time to do it." Intrigued, I ask, "What is it?" Campbell explains, "A clearer style; rewriting letters to transfer from Wang."

The head of Veterans Service Division, Ann O'Hart, commented that she had been involved in "Writing for Real People" training when she was at the Central Office. Then she noted that "the pattern letters used in Veterans Service Division were already written, and Veterans Service Division people didn't really write from scratch so having the rest trained in RFW wouldn't be really beneficial other than to see what the purpose was." This comment tied together some of the other interviewees' views which were that RFW is creating letters rather than applying principles in pattern letters on the PCGL and other computer systems.

A Loan Guaranty employee said, "I have written a letter, two months ago, in the RFW style but we haven't had time to review it." In Adjudication, a Denver employee expressed the opinion, "Overall, they [CO] rewrote the pattern letters into RFW format, it has already been done, it's already in our system." The Adjudication Officer, Raymond Boor had informed me that one staff member had created

⁴ Teri Campbell is a pseudonym.

many of the local letters.⁵ And Anderson reported that she herself had rewritten about 50 letters for the Veterans Service Division.

The RFW Tools course centered lessons on composing correspondence. The Denver staff members reflected this orientation. One of the questions I heard while visiting Colorado was “Why train if the letters are already done?”

Style or Substance? An Adjudication staff person said, “I see people using heading and thinking that they are doing RFW. But I don’t see a whole lot of change in the content of the paragraphs. People got the surface point but didn’t get the real point.” I asked “Which was?” She responded, “That it is the content that is important and how that is worded.” Another Adjudication staff member said, “RFW is the way the letter is viewed [appears] not the substance.” An Adjudication employee remarked, “The RFW style letter don’t take into consideration that there is going to be a person reading this at the end – there can be no sensitivity to some of the letters, some are very cold.” A Loan Guaranty staff member found RFW beneficial in providing a more pleasing format, stating that “my content has always been fine.”

Smith, the Director, claimed the strongest point of RFW was the focusing on the customer. An Authorizer commented, “the main purpose of RFW was to remember that there is someone out there that needs to read it [the letter].” A Veterans Benefits Counselor defined RFW as “a way to communicate to the veteran in a way they can understand.” An Adjudication staff member defined RFW as “an attempt to get away from ‘governmentese’ and focus on easily understood communication.”

My interviewees expressed a spectrum of beliefs about RFW. Some said RFW was an attitude about communication and for others it was just format. RFW does have a recognizable format but the understanding our evaluation team gained from the leaders of RFW was that the training was meant to redesign communication of the VBA. However at

⁵ He recommended I speak to the employee in Adjudication that rewrote a lot of the local pattern letters.

this regional office, the staff was not entirely convinced of the benefits of the new way of doing business via RFW.

Is Simplicity Sought but Complexity Avoided?

In many of my interviews at Denver, I asked about the issue, "While using RFW, when simplicity is sought are complex topics avoided?" I was surprised at the pause people made before responding. And most responses were compounded, i.e. "yes but . . . ; no but . . . ; maybe, but" Several of the responses to my inquiry follow:

I don't think so. No. It rightfully helped people to understand they don't have to use big words . . . and not losing meaning by not using big words. (Director Catherine Smith)

No, making it simple doesn't necessarily mean losing complexity . . . but it is not so important to explain all the particular aspects of a concept, just ask yourself what does a vet really need to know? (Adjudication staff member)

No, [but] the only way it is complicated is in medical topics. I thought it worked better when we used to address every issue in the letter. Now we refer them to the rating decision, that puts a lot on the veteran. (Adjudication staff member)

It is all there if the veteran will read it all. They get the important basic information they need to. If it is too simple, than that if the price to pay to not be too complicated. (Adjudication staff member)

Maybe, to a certain degree. But we deal with the law and medicine and these are complex. (Adjudication staff member)

We can make think things simple and easy to understand (especially in Veterans Service Division) but I am uncertain that would comply with all the legal requirements, especially with decisions being appealed in the Court of Veterans Appeals as they are now. I think these issues are what make it hard for Adjudication

especially to follow RFW guidelines. (VSD Officer Ann O'Hart)

Yes, but it is important to make it as simple as possible and write in "if you don't understand contact us." (Veterans Benefit Counselor)

Yes, the overall expectation that one can simplify everything so it is easier to read but there are some complexities that are requirements of law that we can't change or reword. (Adjudication staff member)

I was asking if the promotion of RFW towards simplifying the letters prevented deep attention to complexities and the interviewees answered, "No" or "It is the legal and medical information that is complicated and we do not put that in simple terms." Some of the Denver staff members referred to the information being communicated as "need-to-know" information and others discussed the information as "right-to-know" legal interpretations. Either perspective prevented, in the view of some letter writers, the simplification of the letter: entitlements are governed by legislative decisions; compensation benefits rely heavily on medical information. Neither field is properly assessed by the untrained individual. One Adjudication staff member suggested that the real need for RFW training existed in Congress.

Needs of the Veterans

A second issue I explored at Denver was how the letter writers attended to the needs of the veterans. I asked, particularly, if RFW helped the letter writers increase their skill in attending to needs. Most of the interviewees claimed knowledge or knowledge and experience enabled them to respond to the veteran's needs. For example, an Adjudicator explained the process she used:

First I read the letter (form, etc.) carefully, paying particular attention to the first sentence. Usually the first sentence has the main need as the topic. Then I respond to the need, maybe researching a little in the manual, by telling the veteran what they are entitled to. Sometimes I

need more clarification from the veteran to determine their eligibility. In those cases I write and request the information.

An interviewee from Loan Guaranty claimed that determining veterans' needs is learned through "on-the-job training." Growing familiar with basic real estate knowledge, the knowledge of VA programs, and skills of interviewing borrowers came with experience--according to this VBA staffer. Another VBA employee said, "Knowledge and experience enable you [VBA] to determine needs." He provided an example of a veteran seeking compensation benefits for prostate cancer. He explained that prostate cancer is covered if the veteran served in Viet Nam and experienced herbicide exposure. He told me that he had included in the letter the information on herbicide exposure and also included the definition of "direct service connection."

According to my Denver interviewees, attending to the needs of veterans is a skill learned through knowledge and experience. Although taught in the RFW Tools course, the staff members I talked with did not find their guidance from the RFW training. Perhaps each division is too specialized to train for determining the needs of veterans in an Agency-wide course. Emerging from the interviews were two kinds of veteran needs--determining what the veteran's request implies that he or she needs and determining what the veteran needs to know. In either case, the interviewees claimed their knowledge of the benefit system and experience in working claims provided them the means to determine the veterans' needs.

Summary Thoughts

On leaving Denver, I realized I had figured out the floor plan, but was still confused. The different definitions of RFW as composing letters versus applying RFW principles, and as content sensitive versus merely format, all surfaced during my visit. Each of these perspectives seemed to describe RFW usage. I saw a close relationship between applying principles and careful consideration of the content. RFW training encouraged the perspective of composing letters. The idea that RFW was just "formatting" was a recognized danger by the designers and instructors. I wished I had asked questions

that gave me a larger database to think through the different definitions.

The discussions I had with Denver staff members about simplification of letters at the expense of avoiding complexity and about determining veterans' needs revealed, for these trainees, some shortcomings of the RFW training. However, during my visit the typical comment was, "It was a good class." The ten-minute survey responses reflected a positive impression of the training. The Denver Regional Office had a third of its employees trained. In the Fall of 1996, 87% of the possible RFW classes had had Denver participants.

I wondered for ROs like Denver, those with fair to large investments in the RFW training, how should the training precede? Some indicated an interest in continuing to train the untrained, others thought the managers should be exposed more thoroughly and still others thought the problems of communication originated outside the RO at the Central Office or Congress. Given the several definitions of RFW, I wondered if the follow-up (the eighth) session of the course, the one never broadcast, would have changed the final picture of RFW for the Denver trainees.