

Section 3.

The Veterans Benefits Administration

A Veteran. “Did you meet Mr. Martin? He lives in the converted shed that the town gave him. He is the last war’s soldier living anywhere in these parts. You did meet him? Well, as you could tell talking with him, he’s in bad health. He was hurt years ago in those battles. He has been crippled since. It’s his leg and now chest pains. He’s not long with us, I’m afraid. He’s never received a penny for his long service. He has no one to help.” In her husband’s elegant house, sitting on the brocade sofa, dressed in her finery, the mayor’s wife spoke about the destitute veteran soldier. “That’s all there is, what he has, in that room. He has what he has been given. The old clothes he wears, the rag bed he sleeps on. He’s too poorly to do for himself. People leave food on his table to keep him. The townsfolk give what little he needs. See him again before you leave the town, he has so few visitors. He’s glad to tell you his war tales.”¹

Then to Now. The U.S. Government has a long and extensive history of providing benefits to war veterans, the precedents for which date back to the American colonial period. The lasting impact of these historical developments is attested to by the fact that the last veteran of the War for Independence drew benefits until his death in 1869.² In more recent history:

1930 - 3 July. Veterans Administration Act consolidated all federal functions for ex-servicemen’s relief in a single agency known as the Veteran’s Administration.³

1944. Congress passed the first G. I. Bill of Rights for veterans.⁴

¹ Heard during a tour of Conner Prairie, an 1800’s Indiana Territory reconstructed town.

² Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Benefits Administration. *The Veterans Benefits Administration: An organizational history: 1776-1994.* Washington, DC, 1994.

³ *Encyclopedia of American History, Seventh Edition,* Richard M. Morris and Jeffrey B. Morris (editors), 1996. HarperCollins, p 376.

1951 - 16 July. Korean G.I. Bill of Rights provided veterans with educational benefits similar to those given to WW II veterans.⁵

1953 - Reorganization of the Veterans Administration and establishment of the Department of Veterans Benefits.

1966. Veteran's Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966 (Vietnam G. I. Bill).⁶

1988 - 25 October. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) was established as an executive department by making the Veterans Administration into a Cabinet post by the Department of Veterans Affairs Act (38 U.S.C. 201 note).⁷ The first Secretary, Edward J. Derwinski, took office 15 March 1989. Other legislation empowered veterans to challenge decisions effecting their welfare in a newly created Court of Veteran Appeals.⁸ The Department of Veterans Affairs comprises three organizations--each with their own field facilities and a Central Office component--that administer veterans programs: the Veterans Health Administration, the Veterans Benefits Administration, and the National Cemetery System.⁹

The Department of Veterans Affairs is organized with a Secretary; Deputy Secretary; Inspector General; General Counsel, Under Secretary for Health; Under Secretary for Benefits; Director for National Cemetery System; Assistant Secretary for Management; Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning; Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration; Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs; and, Assistant Secretary for Congressional Affairs. The five Assistant Secretary areas are assisted by fourteen Deputy Secretaries.

⁴ *New York Public Library American History Desk Reference*, 1997. Stonesong Press, p 190.

⁵ *Encyclopedia of American History, Seventh Edition*, Richard M. Morris and Jeffrey B. Morris (editors), 1996. Harper Collins, p 501.

⁶ Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Benefits Administration. *The Veterans Benefits Administration: An organizational history: 1776-1997*. Washington, DC, p vi.

⁷ Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration. Revised May 31, 1996. *The United States Government Manual, 1996/1997*. Washington, DC, p 473.

⁸ *Encyclopedia of American History, Seventh Edition*, Richard M. Morris and Jeffrey B. Morris (editors), 1996. Harper Collins, p 545.

⁹ Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration. Revised May 31, 1996. *The United States Government Manual, 1996/1997*. Washington, DC, p 473.

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). The Veterans Benefits Administration, formerly the Department of Veterans Benefits, conducts an integrated program of veteran services. It also cooperates with the Department of Labor and other Federal, State, and local agencies in developing employment opportunities for veterans and referral for assistance in resolving socioeconomic, housing, and other related problems. In addition, VBA provides information regarding veterans benefits to various branches of the Armed Forces. Programs are provided through VA Regional Offices, medical centers, visits to communities, and a special toll-free telephone service (800-827-1000) and are available in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

The Veterans Benefits Administration is organized with an Under Secretary for Benefits; a Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits; a Chief of Staff; and Officers for Information Technology; Executive Management and Communications; Human Resources; and, Resource Management. These officials are supported by Area Directors of the Eastern Area (16 Regional Offices and staff), Central Area (13 Regional Offices and staff), Southern Area (13 Regional Offices and staff) and Western Area (16 Regional Offices and staff). Six business lines are located through the national VBA system. In the Central Office, Washington, D.C., the six service Directors of Compensation & Pension Service; Education Service; Loan Guaranty Service; Veterans Assistance Service; Vocational Rehabilitation & Counseling Service; and Insurance Service support Central Office requirements.

The VBA InterNet Home Page displays the VBA's mission and vision. The VBA Mission of the Veterans Benefits Administration, in partnership with the Veterans Health Administration, and the National Cemetery System, is to provide benefits and services to the veterans and their families in a responsive, timely and compassionate manner in recognition of their service to the Nation. The VBA Vision: VBA will earn the respect and trust of veterans, employees and the public by becoming an organization that: is easily accessible by veteran customers for all benefits and services; rapidly and accurately processes requests for benefits; provides clear, understandable, timely and informative

communications; serves as a good steward of the resources entrusted for our use; and provides employees with training opportunities and job satisfaction.

Compensation and Pension. The Compensation and Pension Service has responsibility for: claims for disability compensation and pension; automobile allowances and special adaptive equipment; claims for specially adapted housing; special clothing allowances; emergency officers' retirement pay; eligibility determinations based on military service for other VA benefits and services or those of other Government agencies; survivors' claims for death compensation, dependency and indemnity compensation, death pension, burial and plot allowance claims; claims for accrued benefits; forfeiture determinations; claims for adjusted compensation in death cases; and claims for reimbursement for headstone or marker.

Education. The Education Service has responsibility for: the Montgomery GI Bill - Active Duty and Selected Reserve (chapters 30 and 1606); the Post Vietnam Era Veterans' Educational Assistance Program (chapter 35); the Section 901 Test Program; and school approvals, compliance surveys, and work study.

Vocational Rehabilitation. The Vocational Rehabilitation Service has responsibility for: outreach, motivation, evaluation, counseling, training, employment, and other rehabilitation services to disabled veterans (chapters 31 and 15); evaluation, counseling, and miscellaneous services to veterans and service persons (chapter 30) and other VA education programs; evaluation, counseling, education and miscellaneous services to sons, daughters, and spouses of totally and permanently disabled veterans and to surviving orphans, widows, or widowers of certain deceased veterans, including rehabilitation services to certain handicapped dependents (chapter 35); and affirmative action activities.

Loan Guaranty. Loan Guaranty operations include: appraising properties to establish their values; supervising the construction of new residential properties; establishing the

eligibility of veterans for the program; passing on the ability of a veteran to repay a loan and the credit risk; servicing and liquidating defaulted loans; and disposing of real estate acquired as the consequence of defaulted loans.

Insurance. Life insurance operations are for the benefit of service members, veterans, and their beneficiaries. The day-to-day processing of all matters related to individual insurance accounts is handled by the Regional Office and Insurance Centers in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and St. Paul, Minnesota. These two centers provide the full range of functional activities necessary for a national life insurance program. Activities include the complete maintenance of individual accounts, underwriting functions, and life and death insurance claims awards, as well as any other insurance-related transactions. Information is available toll-free (800-669-8477). The agency is also responsible for the administration of the Veterans Mortgage Life Insurance program for those disabled veterans who receive a VA grant for specially adapted housing. Accounts are maintained at the Regional Office and Insurance Center in St. Paul, MN. In addition, the agency is responsible for supervising the Servicemen's Group Life Insurance (SGLI) and Veterans Group Life Insurance (VGLI) programs. Both programs are handled through the Office of Servicemen's Group Life insurance, 231 Washington Street, Newark, NJ 07102. Veterans may call toll-free (800-419-1473). Veteran Affairs Regional Office and Insurance Centers combine a regional office and an insurance center under the jurisdiction of one director.¹⁰

Veterans Assistance. Through the Veterans Assistance Service, information, advice, and assistance are provided to veterans, their dependents and beneficiaries, representatives, and others in applying for benefits administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs. In addition, the Veterans Assistance Service cooperates with the Department of Labor and other Federal, State, and local agencies in developing employment opportunities for veterans,

¹⁰ Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration. Revised May 31, 1996. *The United States Government Manual, 1996/1997*. Washington, DC, p 478.

and referral assistance for assistance in resolving socioeconomic, housing, and other related problems.

The Service is responsible for maintaining a benefits protection program (fiduciary activities) for minors and incompetent adult beneficiaries. It also provides field investigative services for other VA components. It ensures compliance by schools and training institutions with VA directives. It also ensures compliance with title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (42 U.S.C. 2000d); Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (20 U.S.C. 1681); section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 794) and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, as amended (42 U.S.C. 6101). The programs of the Service are provided through VA regional offices, VA medical centers, itinerant visits to communities, and a special toll-free telephone service in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

The Veterans Assistance Service also has the responsibility of providing information regarding veteran benefits to the various branches of the Armed Forces here and abroad and to veterans residing in foreign countries through United States embassies and consular offices, and of coordinating veterans' activities with foreign governments.¹¹

Regional Offices. Department of Veterans Affairs regional offices: grant benefits and services provided by law for veterans, their dependents and beneficiaries within an assigned territory; furnish information regarding VA benefits and services; adjudicate claims and make awards for disability compensation and pension; supervise the payment of VA benefits to incompetent beneficiaries; aid, guide, and prescribe vocational rehabilitation training and administer educational benefits; guarantee loans for purchase of manufactured homes and lots and condominium units, purchase or construction or alteration of homes and farm residences, and under certain conditions, guarantee refinancing loans; process grants for specially adapted housing; process death claims; assist the veteran in exercising rights to benefits and services; and supervise VA offices under their jurisdiction.

¹¹ Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration. Revised May 31, 1996. *The United States Government Manual, 1996/1997*. Washington, DC, p 475-477.

The field offices are also responsible for veterans assistance activities, including coordination of efforts of participating agencies in an “outreach” program to assist returning service members, particularly those who are educationally disadvantaged. Services to U.S. veterans in most foreign countries normally are provided by the VA Regional Office, District of Columbia. The Honolulu Regional Office serves the islands of American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Wake, and Midway and the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. U.S. veterans in the Virgin Islands and Mexico are served by the San Juan and Houston offices, respectively. Service is provided in cooperation with embassy staffs of the Department of State.¹²

In post-Revolutionary War times and later, the fictional Mr. Martin had little or no veteran “customer voice.” Today, each veteran has a service agency representative or VBA staff assistance for his or her veteran service-related benefit administration needs. Also, he or she has the intent of the VA/VBA Internet homepage’s message: “Putting Customers First.”

¹² Ibid, p 478.

