

Procedural Policy - Handling Feedback from the Veteran Community

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PROCEDURAL POLICY - HANDLING FEEDBACK FROM THE VETERAN COMMUNITY

1. Overview

1.1 Why do we Need a Feedback System?

DVA's vision is to achieve excellence in service delivery. To achieve this we continually need to improve the service we provide to members of the veteran community. One way of achieving this is to encourage them to provide us with feedback, both positive and negative. This will allow us to identify the areas where we are doing well and those where we need to improve. An effective system for identifying, recording and acting upon feedback is an essential part of high quality client service.

As set out in the Corporate Plan, we will endeavour to listen, keep things simple, get things right and find timely and appropriate solutions. As this does not always occur, it is important that we recognise and resolve problems as soon as we become aware of them.

All staff in DVA will be responsible for dealing with and recording feedback and resolving complaints. It is therefore important that each staff member understands how the **DVA Feedback Management System (FMS)** works. Even if you do not deal with the veteran community "face to face", you may respond to correspondence that contains feedback that should be recorded.

1.2 Feedback and the Service Charter

The first DVA Service Charter was launched in May 1998, of which there have been several revisions since. DVA's Service Charter is a public statement of the range and quality of service that clients can expect to receive from the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Office of Australian War Graves. Developed in consultation with the veteran community, ex-service organisations and the Department's staff, the Charter clearly states both our commitment to providing excellent service and the standards by which our quality of service shall be judged.

The DVA Feedback Management System (FMS) has been developed to support the monitoring and review of the Department's performance against the Charter and to assist areas within the Department to better understand what they are doing well at and what they need to improve.

2. The DVA Approach to Handling Feedback

2.1 Definition of Feedback

The Feedback Management System is focussed on service delivery. Thus, DVA's definition of feedback reflects the standards promoted in the DVA Service Charter. For the Department's purposes, feedback is defined as:

"Comment on the way we have met, fallen short of, or exceeded the promises made in the service charter."

Feedback for recording purposes should be comment about a particular service experience or event, not simply a statement of overall opinion about the Department's services. Typically, it will involve a specific transaction with either the Department or an agent providing a service, or services, on its behalf.

2.2a Complaints

As regards complaints, they are neither:

- requests for information or explanation of policies, nor
- disagreements with a decision for which there is a formal avenue of appeal.

If a complaint is about a decision that has a formal avenue of appeal, then information is to be provided on the appeal process. This may be complicated if the complaint about a decision also involves feedback about the service provided by the Department during the decision-making process. Staff members will therefore need to exercise careful judgement when acting upon such feedback.

2.2b Compliments

A compliment is NOT:

- **simply a statement of overall opinion** about the Department's services. Eg "Thank you for processing my claim form." would not be considered a compliment. However if it was something like, "I was extremely impressed by the helpfulness of the staff on a specific occasion or in relation to a particular matter" then it would be considered a compliment to be recorded.

2.3 Basic Principles

The DVA feedback system will be:

Accessible and Widely Publicised

All clients should be aware of the existence of the DVA feedback system and how they can use it. Assistance will be provided, when necessary, to enable people to provide feedback and make complaints.

Confidential

Clients must be able to complain without fear of retribution. All staff should protect the privacy and confidentiality of complainants. Anonymous feedback can be recorded in FMS.

Fair and Equitable

All complaints must be judged on merit and not be biased in favour of the client or staff member. Complainants should have an opportunity to have their complaints handled by an officer not previously involved.

Effective

The information collected should be used to improve services. Responses to complaints should deal with all the points raised and provide suitable outcomes.

Regularly Reviewed

The feedback system will be reviewed regularly.

Open and Accountable

Information will be published regularly about:

- The quantities of feedback provided
- The timeliness of resolution of complaints
- Action taken to improve services as a result of feedback

2.4 How will DVA Accept Feedback?

Feedback will be accepted but is not limited to:

- in person (over the counter or in the field);
- by telephone;
- in writing (by mail or facsimile) to:
 - ◊ the Minister;
 - ◊ the Secretary;
 - ◊ the Deputy Commissioners; or
 - ◊ other staff members; and
- via the Internet.

Complainants should be advised that their details will be recorded but that this information will not be disclosed. The only information that will be disclosed is aggregate data.

2.5 Who will Provide Feedback?

Feedback could be received from:

- veterans and their spouses
- war widow(er)s
- carers
- members of beneficiaries' families
- ex-service organisations
- health care providers, on behalf of veterans
- professional associations/general public

This list provides examples only, and is not intended to be exhaustive.

2.6 Who will Collect Feedback

You will!!! All staff in DVA will be responsible for resolving complaints and recording feedback. It is important to understand the way in which the DVA Feedback Management System works and your role in this system.

3. The DVA Feedback Management System (FMS)

The Feedback Management System is a simple computer program to record and analyse feedback.

3.1 Outline of FMS

FMS Can Perform the Following:

- Record a compliment/complaint and finalise it immediately;
- Record a complaint and finalise it at a later date;
- Record a complaint and refer it to another person to finalise;
- Attach a document to a complaint; and
- Edit a complaint/compliment before it is finalised.

Email Functions

- Email complaints for another person's action.
- Email both complaints and compliments for information.

Search Facility

You can search for feedback records by:

- Reference number (the individual number that is created for every feedback record);
- Contact Name;
- Client Name;
- File Number;
- Output and Activity;
- Date Received; and
- Complaint or compliment.

Definitions

FMS has a glossary of terms, including definitions of complaint and compliment. Definitions of other terms used in recording feedback are also listed.

Reports

Reports can be created to help analyse feedback. Some of these are:

- Standard reports;
- Custom reports which allow specific reports to be created; and
- Unresolved complaints reports.

3.2 When is a Complaint Resolved?

When there is no further possible action that can be taken. The complainant should be informed of further avenues of complaint, eg Commonwealth Ombudsman, if they are not happy with the result.

3.3 Internal Transfer

Whenever a complaint is transferred from one officer to another, the complainant should be informed of the name and telephone number of the officer who will thereafter handle their complaint. It is envisaged that the frequency of transfers will be minimal. All complaints concerning privacy are to be referred to the Privacy Officer in National Office.

3.4 Complaints about Staff Members

Complaints about staff members should be directed to a senior manager. The senior manager will impartially investigate the complaint.

Staff members must be treated fairly when complaints are made about them. This involves:

- telling them immediately and fully about any complaint against them;
- giving them an opportunity to tell their side of the story; and
- keeping them informed of progress and the results of investigations.

3.5 Providing Reasons for Decisions

All complainants should be provided with the reasons for any decision made in relation to their complaint. This is irrespective of the outcome of the complaint.

3.6 Remedies/Outcomes

Remedies or outcomes could be provided to a client by:

- apologising;
- clarifying information that has been provided;
- providing more detailed information;
- fixing an identified mistake and informing the client;
- changing policy &/or procedures, and informing the client of the outcomes;
- improving training, and informing the client of the outcome;
- making alterations to contractual arrangements, and informing the client of the outcomes;
- providing compensation/ redress; or
- taking no action.

4. Other Issues

4.1 Recurring or Vexatious Complaints from the Same Client

These complaints will be referred to senior managers who will:

- decide a cut-off point when there is no possible further action to be taken; management will inform staff of how to deal with any further complaints.
- Inform the complainant of other avenues of complaint (such as the Commonwealth Ombudsman).

Each new item of correspondence should be carefully checked to ensure that no new issues are raised.

Note: The FMS search function allows you to quickly and easily search under the complainants name to see if their complaint has been already entered. Different complaints by the same client should be recorded but obviously we wish to avoid multiple recordings of the same complaint from the same person.

4.2 Multiple Approaches by the Same Client about the Same Issue (eg letter to Minister, letter to Secretary, letter to Federal MP, etc)

The highest level at which the complaint is directed will co-ordinate the response. Searches of the feedback database can be used to identify these multiple approaches.

See **Note** above.

4.3 Anonymous Feedback

The Department will accept anonymous feedback. The officer accepting the feedback should emphasise that the Department values feedback, and should reassure the person that it does not victimise people who make complaints. Where possible, it should be explained to people making anonymous complaints that without sufficient detail it will be difficult for the Department to respond.

Sometimes the provision of details may identify the client. Complainants should be advised accordingly, so that they are able to make an informed decision as to whether they wish to continue to make their complaint.

4.4 Feedback from Third Parties

The department will accept complaints made by third parties. However, it is important to check that the client is content for the department to investigate the complaint that has been made on their behalf. Personal details cannot be disclosed without the permission of the client.

4.5 Feedback about Health Providers

All feedback concerning health providers should be logged to allow for statistical analysis. Complaints about providers that may cover professional misconduct should be referred, in each State Office, to the appropriate, designated area. A decision as to

whether the complaint should be referred to the State Health Complaints Commissioner or equivalent, will be made in the customary way.

4.6 Feedback Received from Health Providers and Contractors

Feedback that is received from DVA-contracted health providers, and which is about services that they (and not client veterans) have received from DVA, is to be dealt with according to practices established in each State Office.

APPENDIX

When Receiving Feedback . . .

Do

- be polite
- give your name
- record the client's details
- accept feedback even if it is not about your area/program/section
- let the client have their say
- listen carefully
- record the facts (dates, etc.) and make notes
- explain how the FMS works, and what will happen next
- ask the client whether he or she is satisfied with the proposed course of action
- act quickly once the feedback is given
- stay calm, even if the person gets angry
- empathise with the client
- be honest
- acknowledge the client's feelings

Don't

- argue with the client
- accept personal abuse
- get angry
- ask a client to complain in writing, or to come back at a later time
- offer excuses
- be defensive
- blame others
- consider a complaint as a personal criticism