REFERRAL TO INPATIENT BLIND REHABILITATION CENTERS AND CALCULATION OF THE WAITING TIME PRIOR TO ADMISSION

1. PURPOSE: This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Directive defines policy for referring blinded veterans to a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Blind Rehabilitation Center (BRC), for inpatient training programs, and for calculating the waiting times for admission. *NOTE: The referral is considered the application.*

2. BACKGROUND

a. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) conducted an evaluation of the waiting times for admission to VA BRC Services in 2004. The final report issued by GAO recommended that the Under Secretary for Health develop more specific instructions for calculating waiting times. This VHA Directive addresses the GAO recommendation and is intended to provide direction for the accurate reporting of waiting times for BRC programs.

b. The waiting time for admission to a BRC is defined as the number of days between the date a referral is received at a BRC and the first admission date offered to the applicant. The Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS) National database is used to automatically calculate the number of days.

NOTE: The actual admission date must be recorded on the national database, but will not be used for reporting a veteran's waiting time.

c. The BRS Program Office has developed specific instructions for calculating waiting times, data definitions, and referral procedures to address the equitability of, and timeliness of, service delivery.

d. BRC inpatient programs are currently located at the following VHA facilities:

(1) VA Medical Center, Augusta, GA,

(2) VA Medical Center, Birmingham, AL,

(3) Central Texas VA Health Care System, Waco, TX,

(4) VA Health Care System, West Haven, CT,

(5) VA Hospital, Hines, IL,

(6) Puget Sound VA Health Care System, American Lake, WA,

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(7) VA Medical Center, San Juan, PR,

(8) Southern Arizona Health Care System, Tucson, AZ,

(9) VA Health Care System, Palo Alto, CA, and

(10) VA Medical Center, West Palm Beach, FL.

e. The BRS Program Office with the assistance of the VHA Office of Information is developing a new National Blind Rehabilitation Database (Blind Rehabilitation Version 5.0) that monitors all aspects of BRS delivery for the Visual Impairment Services Team (VIST), the Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialists (BROS), and the BRC programs including BRC waiting times. This new database package has an expected release time of second quarter of Fiscal Year (FY) 2006. All BRS employees are required to use this database for blind rehabilitation service delivery. Training is required and can be obtained through the blind rehabilitation website at: http://vaww1.va.gov/blindrehab, or by contacting the National Consultant assigned to the catchment area.

NOTE: The current BRS Waiting Times Database is to be used by all BRC programs to calculate and report waiting times at BRCs until the new National Blind Rehabilitation Database is released to the field.

3. POLICY: It is VHA policy that blinded veteran's referrals for admission to BRC inpatient training programs and the use of the current Waiting Times Database to calculate and report BRC waiting times are to be implemented immediately.

4. ACTION

a. **Facility Director.** The blinded veteran is considered to be an inpatient of the VA facility. As such, application criteria management is generally the same as for any veteran receiving inpatient hospital treatment and care. The facility Director is responsible for ensuring that:

(1) The waiting time data is accurately reported to the BRS Program Office using the instructions provided in Attachment A;

(2) Any necessary eligibility determinations as required by the VA facility housing the BRC (e.g., VA Form 10-10, Admission Form, and VA Form 10-10F, Rating Decision Form) are conducted.

(3) An eye examination progress note, or summary, documenting the legal blindness of the veteran is signed by an eye care practitioner from whom the following can be readily derived:

(a) The diagnosis responsible for the vision loss,

(b) The best corrected central visual acuity of each eye, and

(c) The visual field of each eye when the visual impairment criteria are not met through visual acuity loss.

(3) A physical examination and history of the veteran is taken which details:

(a) All medical conditions that may affect progress in the rehabilitation program;

(b) Pertinent laboratory reports (e.g., Complete Blood Count (CBC) with differential, Chem. 7, Urinalysis, etc.);

(c) Current medications (if applicable, include current oxygen prescription and provider of oxygen delivery equipment); and

(d) Chest X-ray, Electrocardiogram (EKG), and past medical reports (as determined appropriate by Primary Care Medical Provider).

(4) A statement of medical stability is provided by the Primary Care Medical Provider as it relates to the veteran's capacity to participate in the BRC Program.

b. **VIST Coordinator.** The VIST Coordinator is responsible for ensuring that:

(1) Application materials are current (within 6 months of application submission date) and include the following:

(a) A cover letter or memorandum containing date of referral, veteran's name and identifying information, type of BRC Program for which the application is being submitted, a description of any significant problems or unique circumstances presented by the applicant, and identification of VIST Coordinator and referring facility.

(b) Assessments, when applicable, from other consultative services that provide a description of the level of independence and/or assistance needed on activities of daily living such as:

1. Wound care,

2. Tracheotomy care,

3. Stoma or ostomy care,

4. Wheelchair transfers,

5. Oxygen use,

6. Medication management, and

7. Personal hygiene.

(c) Applications are submitted with completed audiological examinations. Pending audiology exams may be submitted. Audiology issues must be resolved within 90 calendar days or the application is considered incomplete and returned to the VIST Coordinator.

(d) A psychiatric or psychological report indicating the applicants capacity to participate in the program if there is a history of central nervous system dysfunction, psychiatric diagnosis (including substance abuse), or any active treatment for a mental and/or emotional condition.

(e) An individualized assessment by a mental health professional. This is required to determine whether the applicant is able to benefit from blind rehabilitation if the applicant has demonstrated current or recent alcohol or substance abuse or dependence. Issues such as depression, sleep disorder, seizure, etc. can be successfully managed prior to admission and may require ongoing management in the BRC. In cases of suspected alcohol or substance abuse or dependence, the psychologist or admission committee utilizes clinical judgment and may request that a substance abuse evaluation be conducted by a mental health professional.

(f) A complete VIST assessment and/or psycho-social report, which must include the veteran's expressed needs and goals, functional capabilities, as well as a description of any previous VA and non-VA blind rehabilitation training.

(2) If the veteran has been evaluated and/or trained by a BROS or other specialist in preparation for admission to the BRC, all pre-admission evaluations, assessments, and training reports are provided to the admitting BRC Program prior to admission.

(3) That appropriate medical and eye information is recorded in the veteran's CPRS file at the time of referral for the veteran receiving health care at a VA facility. *NOTE: This enables the BRC staff to complete a timely decision-making process.*

(4) That a hard copy containing appropriate medical and eye information, for the veteran who receives health care from a non-VA provider, is sent to the BRC.

c. **BRC Chief.** The BRC Chief is responsible for:

(1) Data entry and documentation. This means completing data entry in the interim BRC Waiting Times National Database on the application status of each application received at the BRC. In order to ensure accurate recording for the BRS monthly report (until the new BRS database is operational) the "application received" date <u>must</u> be recorded in the same month the application is received. The "discharge date" <u>must</u> be recorded in the month of discharge. When the new national database is operational, a referral for BRC admission must be submitted electronically through the Blind Rehabilitation National Database by the VIST Coordinator. The application received date is automatically entered in the database. Applications sent to BRCs are automatically placed on the waiting list and placed in the "pending" status until the BRC Chief, or designee, starts the review process of the application. Assignment status must be made within 20 working days of receipt of application of "accept," or (preliminarily) "cancel," or "reject" the

application. Applications (referrals) in the "pending, accept, and in review" status are on the waiting list.

(2) Ensuring that veterans who are on a BRC waiting list receive an offer for a BRC rehabilitation start date within 120 days of application receipt. Applications sometimes require supplemental information to establish the veterans' capacity to participate in blind rehabilitation. In addition, because blinded veterans are often elderly, they often need to attend medical appointments, secure hearing aids, and tend to personal business, so they must be allowed sufficient time to make preparations to leave home and attend a BRC for an extended period of time. For these reasons, a waiting time of 120 days is considered acceptable.

(3) Maintaining communication with veterans while they are waiting for BRC admission. If prompt blind rehabilitation is needed to address health or safety issues, the BRC must expedite admission. In these, cases, the BRC refers the veteran back to the referring VIST Coordinator to make every effort to arrange for BROS or other local blind rehabilitation services to address the veteran's pressing needs. The veteran's application stays on the waiting list during this period. If the veteran receives BROS or local services during this period and still desires to attend BRC, the veteran's program will be reassessed and shortened if necessary. If the veteran no longer desires to attend a BRC, the veteran's referral to the BRC should be withdrawn.

(4) Reviewing the application (referral) to confirm the veteran's appropriateness for admission to the BRC Program. This review considers whether:

(a) The application is administratively complete. *NOTE: An application is considered complete if the information listed in subparagraph 4b(2) is included.*

(b) The ocular and vision data documented in the eye exam is consistent with legal blindness.

(c) The veteran's eye condition is stable and there are no pending treatment procedures. An exception to this may be made under the following circumstances, i.e., a direct hospital transfer for blind rehabilitation training to a BRC is permitted for a patient who is in immediate need of blind rehabilitation services in order to manage health care regimens and health literacy prior to hospital discharge. The veteran must be medically stable and the BRC must have a bed available for admission. If a bed is not available, the patient awaiting transfer must be given highest priority for the next available bed.

(d) The veteran's medical and psychological status is stable in order to maximize the veteran's potential to benefit from the program.

(5) Notifying the VIST Coordinator when additional information is needed in order to confirm the appropriateness of the veteran for the program. The VIST Coordinator must respond with a plan of action within 10 working days and the requested information must be received within 30 days (except for audiology issues which have a 90-day time frame) or an explanation provided as to why the information cannot be submitted within the 30-day time frame. The application is to be placed in the "in review" status on the national database pending receipt of

the requested information. If information is not provided in the designated time frame, the application is considered "rejected" (incomplete) and returned to the VIST Coordinator.

(6) Consulting with the referring VIST Coordinator when a review of an application indicates that the veteran is not appropriate for admission, before a final decision is made, in order to present the rationale for the decision and to consider any extenuating circumstances. Cancelled and rejected applications require notification from the BRC to the veteran, with a courtesy copy to the referring VIST Coordinator. This notification must provide the rationale for the cancellation or rejection along with a recommendation to consult the VIST Coordinator regarding alternative services.

(7) Returning the application to the referring VIST Coordinator when an application is rejected due to receipt of an incomplete application; at the same time notifying the Regional Consultant.

(8) Adding each accepted application to the BRC waiting list and informing the veteran of this decision by letter. The letter must include an estimated waiting time for admission, as well as any cost that may be incurred by the veteran. A courtesy copy of this letter must be forwarded to the veteran's VIST Coordinator.

(9) Forwarding the required documents to the Eligibility Coordinator at the facility where the program is located to ensure the applicant is properly enrolled in the VA system.

(10) Providing information regarding the scope of services and estimated duration of training to the veteran after a veteran has been accepted for the rehabilitation program.

(a) The BRC must provide the veteran scheduled for admission with appropriate information concerning clothing, footwear, equipment, details of daily life at the BRC, and any pertinent local information.

(b) The veteran and the BRC must mutually agree upon the reporting date and travel arrangements.

(c) The referring VIST Coordinator (and BROS where applicable) must be notified of these arrangements.

(11) Canceling the application of any veteran who declines three offers of admission to the BRC. The veteran must be advised to reapply through the VIST Coordinator when ready to attend. Cancelled applications require notification from the BRC to the veteran, with a courtesy copy to the referring VIST Coordinator.

5. REFERENCES: None.

6. FOLLOW UP RESPONSIBILITY: The Chief Officer, Office of Patient Care Services (11), is responsible for the contents of this Directive. Questions related to blind rehabilitation services may be addressed to the Director, Blind Rehabilitation Services, at 202-273-8482.

7. RESCISSION: None. This VHA Directive expires October 31, 2010.

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Under Secretary for Health

Attachment

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ATTACHMENT A

**INSTRUCTIONS AND DATA DEFINITIONS FOR BLIND REHABILITATION
CENTER (BRC) WAITING TIMES DATABASE**

The interim Blind Rehabilitation Center (BRC) waitlist database can be found on the Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS) website at https://vaww1.va.gov/br_waitlist/index.cfm. Authorized users are provided a username and password to access the database. Each BRC Chief, or designee, is an authorized user of this database.

1. MAIN PAGE OF BRC WAITING TIMES DATABASE

a. The main page displays a summary of all information entered on each veteran who has applied for admission to the BRC. Records displayed exclude any veteran whose status is "Admitted." Records displayed include veterans in all other status categories.

b. Select entries can be viewed by highlighting options in the "Select Fields" box. Individual or multiple options can be chosen by using the Ctrl key. By holding down the Ctrl key and selecting fields via the mouse, the user may select more than one field at a time. *NOTE: This option is only possible by using a mouse; it cannot be accessed by using the keyboard.*

c. Checking *"Show Admitted Veterans Only"* displays veterans whose status is *"Admitted.'*

d. Records can be displayed individually, or the user can select the desired number of records to be displayed from the "Records per Page" box.

e. A search for an individual veteran can be performed by selecting "Search by Patient Name."

f. The Go Key, located by the "records per page selection," processes the information request and shows requested patient data.

g. Selecting the "National Total" provides average waiting time information and application summary totals for all previous and current applications submitted to the ten BRCs. Averages and total calculations do not include records that have no data in the fields.

h. Summary totals for current applications on a waiting list need to be obtained through the reports menu.

i. To add a veteran to the waiting list select "Add New Entry" and follow the instructions in paragraph 2.

2. NEW ENTRY AND EDIT PAGE. *NOTE: For easiest entry, data needs to be entered from left to right and top to bottom on this screen.*

a. Patient name, Social Security Number (SSN), Date Application (App) Received, and App Status are required fields.

b. Dates must be in *"MM/DD/YYYY"* format.

c. Dates must be valid. e.g., l to 31 for days, 1 to 12 for months.

d. If the admitting (admit) date is filled, status can only be *"Admitted"* or *"Discharged."*

e. If status is *"Admitted,"* the admit date must be filled.

f. If status is *"Discharged,"* the discharge date must be filled.

g. The program automatically calculates days as soon as two relevant dates are filled in.

h. If the user deletes information in the *days* fields after the program has calculated them, they are re-calculated when the submit button is clicked.

i. If a date field is empty, the program automatically erases the relevant days fields information that require that date when the submit button is clicked.

3. DATA ENTRY INSTRUCTIONS AND DEFINITIONS

a. **Field #1:** Patient Name. Enter veteran's last name, first name, and middle initial (required field).

b. **Field # 2:** SSN. Enter veteran's SSN using dashes (e.g., 123-45-6789).

c. **Field #3:** Date App Received at BRC. Enter the date the application was received at the __(Name of BRC)__ BRC. Dates must be in *"MM/DD/YYYY"* format.

d. **Field # 4:** Date Application Review Complete. Enter the date the BRC completes its review of the application.

e. **Field # 5:** Application Status. The application status information is used to generate individual and national reports. The following categories for application statuses can be selected in the drop down box:

(1) **In-review.** Application has been received by the BRC and is being reviewed for appropriateness and completion.

(2) **Deferred.** requires additional information to determine appropriateness. The reasons for deferral should be noted in Field #19, "Reasons Not Admitted" (see subpar. 3p). Careful consideration should be given to this category, as an application may remain in this category for only 90 days.

(3) **Rejected.** When the additional information requested is not received within 30 days.

(4) **Complete.** Application review is completed and application is pending acceptance.

(5) **Accept.** Application review process has been completed and the application has been approved for admission.

(6) **Referral to BROS.** The veteran's needs can be met by BROS.

(7) **Admitted.** The veteran has been admitted to the BRC. The admission date must be entered in Field #10.

(8) **Discharged.** Veteran has been discharged from the BRC. The date of discharge entered in Field #17 should be within same month of actual discharge.

(9) **Cancelled.** Application has been cancelled by BRC staff or the veteran. Reasons for cancellation are entered into Field # 19. An application may be cancelled for one of the following reasons. A veteran is not eligible for VA care if the:

(a) Veteran is not legally blind or is receiving current visual medical treatment.

(b) Veteran is medically unstable.

(c) Veteran has mental health issues that prevent effective rehabilitation.

(d) Veteran has personal or family issues.

(e) Veteran's needs are being met by non-VA care.

(f) Veteran is no longer interested.

(g) BRC staff is unable to contact the veteran.

(h) Veteran is deceased.

(i) The veteran has declined the three "admission" dates that have been offered.

f. **Field # 6:** Days from Application Review to Review Complete. The Program calculates and completes this field automatically in days as soon as the two relevant dates are entered in Field #3 and Field #4.

g. **Field # 7:** Date first offered Admit. Enter the date that the veteran is offered admission to BRC.

h. **Field # 8:** Days from Review Complete to 1st Offer. The Program calculates and completes this field automatically in days as soon as the two relevant dates are entered in Field

#4 and Field #7.

    i. **Field #9:** Days from Application received to 1st Offer. The Program calculates and completes this field automatically in days as soon as the two relevant dates are entered in Field #3 and Field #7.

    j. **Field # 10:** Admit Date. Enter the date of admission to BRC.

    k. **Field # 11:** Days from 1st Offer to Admit Date. The Program calculates and completes this field automatically as soon as the two relevant dates are entered in Field #7 and Field #10.

    l. **Field # 12:** Days from Application received to Admit Date. The Program calculates and completes this field automatically in days as soon as the two relevant dates are entered in Field #3 and Field #10.

    m. **Fields # 13-16:** Type of Program. Select and enter the number 1 for the type of program the patient is accepted for, i.e., Reg Admit, Dual Admit, CAT Admit, or Other Admit. Only one program type can be selected.

    n. **Field # 17***:* BRC Discharge Date. Enter the date the veteran is discharged from BRC.

    o. **Field # 18:** Bed Days of Care. The Program calculates and completes this field automatically in days as soon as the two relevant dates are entered in Field #10 and Field #17.

    p. **Field # 19:** Reason not admitted. Enter the reason the veteran was not admitted to BRC by using field codes 1-4, identified as follows:

    (1) 1. Not eligible.

    (2) 2. Cancelled.

    (3) 3. Medical Reasons.

    (4) 4. Provide explanation. The field accepts typed explanations such as the:

    (a) Veteran is not eligible for VA care.

    (b) Veteran is not legally blind.

    (c) Veteran is currently receiving treatment for a visual condition.

    (d) Veteran is medically unstable.

    (e) Veteran has mental health issues that prevent effective rehabilitation.

    (f) Veteran has personal or family issues.

(g) Veteran's needs are being met by BROS.

(h) Veteran's needs are being met by non-VA care.

(i) Veteran is no longer interested.

(j) BRC staff is unable to contact the veteran.

(k) Veteran is deceased.

(l) The application is incomplete.

(m) The veteran has declined three offered admission dates.

q. **Fields 20-23:** Relate to Previous training in a BRC.

r. **Field # 20:** Date of Previous Admission. Enter the admission date of previous blind rehabilitation training if patient has received prior blind rehabilitation training in a BRC.

s. **Field # 21:** Previous BRC Discharge Date. Enter the discharge date of any previous blind rehabilitation training in a BRC.

t. **Field # 22:** Type of Program for Previous Admission to BRC. Select the type of training provided, i.e., Reg, CAT, Dual, or Other.

u. **Field # 23:** Total Days Since Last Discharge. The Program calculates and completes this field automatically in days as soon as the two relevant dates are entered in Field #10 and Field #21.

NOTE: Choose "OK" to save data entries when done, or Cancel to void entries. All records can be browsed and edited.

4. **BROWSE RECORD PAGE**

a. Regional Administrators can browse and edit only patient records in their facilities.

b. Super Administrators can browse, edit, add, and delete patient records in any facility.

c. Deleting a patient record deletes the record completely from the database without the possibility of recovery.

(1) Records are sorted by patient identification (ID) and not by name.

(2) Browse buttons function as follows, the button brings:

(a) Up first patient file entered by earliest date,

(b) Up last patient file entered by latest date,

(c) User back by one patient file from current location, and

(d) User forward by one patient file from current location.

5. REPORT PAGE

a. Reports can be generated for the status of all records (i.e., the number of applications deferred, number of veterans admitted, discharged, etc.) by selecting the option in the "Status" box.

b. <u>For Waiting List Reporting.</u> In the "Status" box, select: "Waitlist." ***NOTE:*** *Status "Waitlist" does not include veterans whose status is "Cancelled," "Referred to BROS." "Admitted," "Rejected," or "Discharged."*

c. Select the dates for reporting period. The dates fields refer to the Application Received Date.

d. In order to implement dates in the report, both *"From"* and *"To"* dates must be filled.

e. To include <u>all the records up to a certain date,</u> specify a date like "01/01/1950," i.e., a vintage date for which there is no record with App received date <u>before</u> that date in the *"From"* date field. ***NOTE:*** *Do not leave it empty.*

f. To include <u>all the records after a certain date</u>, specify a date like *"01/01/2030"* (a future date for which there is no record with App received date <u>after</u> that date) in the "To" date field. ***NOTE:*** *Do not leave it empty.*

g. The calculation for *All Average* does not include patient records that have no data in the relevant fields. For example, in calculating the average admission time in days for three records; if one record has no data, one record has "9" entered in the field, and one record has "5" entered in the field, the average time in days is calculated as "7." $\frac{(5+9)}{2} = 7$

h. Waiting list reports provide the:

(1) Total number of applications on the waiting list by program type (total number of applications in this category).

(2) Total number of applications on the waiting list by program type (i.e., Reg, CAT, Dual, Other).

(3) Average number of days that applications were received at BRC until the application

review process was completed (average days application received to review).

    (4) Average number of days from the completion of the review of the application until the veteran was offered admission (average days review to offer).

    (5) Total completion time for all applications submitted (total application completion time).

    (6) Average application completion time.

    (7) Average waiting time for veterans on the waiting list for admission to a BRC (average days from the time the application was received to the offer of admission date).

NOTE: All reports can be generated for all veterans or for an individual veteran. All reports contain names of veterans that meet the report criteria. Information on individual veterans can be obtained by double clicking the veteran's name.