

**STATEMENT OF
WILLIE C. CLARK, SR.
DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR FIELD OPERATIONS
VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION (VBA)
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Good afternoon Chairman Pappas, Ranking Member Bergman, Members of the Subcommittee, Chairwoman Brownley, and Members of the Women Veterans Task Force. Thank you for the invitation to speak today on the important topic of the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) support for survivors of Military Sexual Trauma (MST). Accompanying me today is Ms. Beth Murphy, Executive Director of Compensation Service, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and Dr. Margret Bell, National Deputy Director for Military Sexual Trauma, Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

VA is strongly committed to supporting Veterans who experienced Military Sexual Trauma, or MST, which is defined as sexual assault or repeated and threatening sexual harassment that occurs during military service. Nobody should ever have to experience such trauma, much less the men and women who are serving our Nation and protecting our freedoms. And yet, too often, they do. Survivors of MST can experience both physical and mental health issues as a result of that trauma. VA is committed to helping these survivors receive the health care services they need to treat MST-related mental and physical health conditions. When Veterans suffer from MST-related conditions, VA may also be able to provide disability compensation. In this statement, I will provide an update on specific efforts within VBA and VHA to improve services and care for Veterans who have experienced MST and on the collaboration between VBA and VHA in support of MST survivors.

MST-Related Claims Processing

VA strives to provide accurate and timely benefits to our Veterans. The sensitive and complex nature of MST-related claims makes it critically important that VBA provide compassionate assistance to affected Veterans in gathering all necessary evidence to fairly and accurately decide their claims. To ensure MST-related claims are prioritized, VBA designates specialized Veterans Service Representatives (VSR) and Rating Veterans Service Representatives (RVSR) at each Regional Office (RO) to be accountable for these claims. These VSRs and RVSRs are specifically trained to process MST-related claims. As a quality check, a second-signature review is required

for all MST-rating decisions until the specialized processors achieve a required accuracy rate of 90 percent.

In September 2019, VBA completed its review of approximately 9,700 previously-denied MST claims from October 1, 2016, through June 30, 2018. If, upon review, the denial was deemed incorrect, VBA initiated corrective actions, as recommended by VA's Office of Inspector General. Of the 9,700, approximately 1,900 required additional development.

MST-Related Health Care

VA provides care for mental and physical health conditions related to MST free of charge. This includes outpatient, residential, and inpatient care as well as pharmaceuticals. Eligibility for MST-related care is very broad: Veterans may be able to receive free MST-related care even if they are not eligible for other VA care. For example, there are no length of service or income requirements to receive MST-related care. Very importantly, an adjudicated service connection is not required. Veterans do not need to have reported their experiences of MST at the time they occurred or have other documentation that the trauma occurred in order to receive MST-related health care. Veterans do not need to initiate MST-related health care within a certain time period after their experiences of MST or within a certain time after discharge.

VHA offers a full continuum of mental health services for both male and female Veterans who experienced MST. Specialty services are available to target problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder, substance use disorders, depression, and homelessness. Outpatient MST-related services are available at every VA health care system, and MST-related outpatient counseling services are available through VA's community-based Vet Centers. VHA also offers residential programs for Veterans who need more intensive treatment and support, and inpatient programs are available for acute care needs. As with other VA health care services, Veterans can receive care for MST-related conditions from community providers if they meet the requirements for community care referrals more generally.

Every VA health care system has a VHA MST Coordinator who serves as a point of contact for Veterans seeking help for MST-related issues. VHA also works to ensure that Veterans are aware of MST-related services and promotes engagement into care. Recognizing that many survivors of sexual trauma do not disclose their experiences unless asked directly, it is VA policy that all Veterans seen in VA medical facilities must be screened for experiences of MST. This is an important way to ensure that Veterans are aware of and offered the free MST-related care available through VHA. For Veterans who experienced MST, it also helps ensure that their trauma history is considered in the provision of care.

MST-related Training

VBA has significantly updated and improved its training for the processing of MST-related claims. During Fiscal Year (FY) 2019, VBA required all MST claims processors to complete a mandatory course on claims development and rating procedures. The training included detailed descriptions of the types of evidence that may be considered in support of MST-related claims. Another mandatory course featured step-by-step instructions on how to utilize the new checklists. The claims development checklists were designed to assist decision makers by ensuring those reviewing a Veteran's claim for disability compensation complete specific steps for MST-related claims. These courses are available to ROs, as needed, to train new MST claims processors and as refreshers for those who were previously certified.

Also, in FY 2019, VBA provided a national refresher course that included an in-depth review of MST error trends and pertinent procedural and manual references. Going forward, this training will be offered annually. Furthermore, in December 2019, at a semi-annual training event for VBA managers, multiple small group breakout training sessions were held that focused on the importance of handling MST claims appropriately and with sensitivity. The importance of consistency in claims development and ratings is reinforced during other interactions as well. Throughout FY 2019 and into FY 2020, MST-related claims have been a regular topic of discussion on VBA's national Compensation Service Quality calls. Additionally, VBA conducted a Special Focus Review (SFR) of MST claims in FY 2019 to establish a baseline accuracy level. VBA will conduct another SFR on MST claims in FY 2020 to monitor progress and adjust our process based on lessons learned.

VBA plans to host its first MST Training Symposium in April 2020. MST Coordinators and employees designated to process MST-related claims will be brought together for training to enhance their ability to improve the Veteran experience. We plan to invite MST survivors to speak directly on their experiences. In collaboration with VHA, the training symposium will also feature an MST panel discussion with VHA clinicians and a session on suicide prevention.

VA recognizes that all staff members in our health care system play a role in improving access and reducing barriers to care. VHA has a range of initiatives to ensure both clinical and frontline staff are prepared to assist MST survivors. Since 2006, VHA has funded a national MST Support Team to promote best practices in the field. The Team has established an MST Consultation Program that is available to any VHA staff member with questions related to assisting Veterans who experienced MST. These consultations are a key way to assist staff in providing high quality care and services. In addition, all VHA mental health providers and primary care providers are required to complete mandatory training on MST. VHA also offers a range of supplemental national MST-related training for staff, including monthly training calls, an annual conference on treatment program development, online courses, and a community of practice intranet Web site.

The MST Support Team also conducts an “Answer the Call” campaign to ensure that Veterans calling VA medical facilities with MST-related questions have positive experiences with frontline staff and are quickly connected with a VHA MST Coordinator. As part of the campaign, VHA employees conduct test calls to VA medical centers and select Community-Based Outpatient Clinics to verify that frontline staff, such as telephone operators and clinic clerks, are familiar with the terms “military sexual trauma” and “MST,” can readily identify and direct callers to a VHA MST Coordinator and are sensitive to Veterans’ privacy concerns. Facilities receive feedback on the results of these calls and use them to improve the Veteran experience.

MST-related training also is provided to those who conduct Medical Disability Examinations (MDE). VBA requires completion of a general certification for all contracted clinicians who conduct MDEs for MST-related issues. This certification includes training courses that equip contracted examiners with the sensitivity and skills to interact with Veterans who have experienced MST and to recognize behavioral changes indicative of MST. The training courses are designed for both contract clinicians who perform these examinations and VHA clinicians. VBA and VHA continue to collaborate to improve and update these training courses.

MST Outreach

VA is dedicated to improving outreach to Veterans, especially those affected by MST. Every RO has coordinators who specialize in outreach for certain Veteran populations, such as homeless, former Prisoners of War, and minority Veterans to assist them with benefits and services including two MST Coordinators (a male and a female). MST Coordinators working in the RO are specially trained to assist those who have experienced MST and come to submit or follow up on their claim. To support the RO MST Coordinators, there are two program managers in VBA Central Office. The program managers provide recurring guidance to the field on MST-related outreach, including through a quarterly teleconference.

VBA conducts recurring targeted MST outreach that includes briefings to inform, educate, and empower Veterans to access VA benefits and resources. These briefings include information on how to file an MST-related claim and how to contact an MST Coordinator near the Veteran. In the first quarter of FY 2020, VBA completed 187 hours of MST-related outreach at 22 events, reaching over 500 Veterans, family members, and other stakeholders. A complete list of MST Coordinators serving in ROs, by state, can be found at <https://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/mstcoordinators.asp>.

VBA MST Coordinators also collaborate with VHA to conduct outreach, ensure there is a warm hand-off to VHA MST Coordinators who are available at every VA health care system for assistance with access to counseling and treatment, and provide MST-related training to Department of Defense (DoD) personnel.

VBA’s MST Coordinators also work with the Women Veteran Coordinators (WVC) at each RO, including in the National Call Centers and at Pension Management

Centers. WVCs conduct local outreach and VA benefit briefings to women Veterans within their jurisdiction. At some locations, the WVC also fulfills the role of the female MST Coordinator. MST and WVCs work together with Veterans, their families, and local groups advocating for Veterans to increase awareness of and access to VA services and programs.

Furthermore, VBA ensures that all public contact representatives who interact with Veterans and families receive annual training on a daily basis to help them identify indicators of stressors and signs that a Veteran may have experienced MST.

VHA also engages in a variety of outreach efforts to ensure Veterans are aware that MST-related services are available.

Throughout the year, VHA MST Coordinators engage in local outreach efforts, including hosting events in honor of Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month in April. These include educational events designed to increase knowledge and awareness of MST among all staff throughout the medical facility, informational events about the impact of MST and VA services for Veterans, and awareness-raising events that include opportunities for survivors to share their stories of MST and recovery. To support these efforts, VHA has developed national outreach posters, handouts, and educational documents for Veterans, secured inclusion of information about MST on relevant va.gov Web sites, and developed a publicly-accessible MST-specific informational Web site at <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome/index.asp>. Outreach materials include both gender-inclusive and gender-specific (i.e., targeting women and men) products.

To assist transitioning Servicemembers, the VA Transition Assistance Program benefits and services briefing provides information including:

- An overview of MST;
- Information about MST-related care available at VA medical centers;
- Eligibility requirements for MST-related health care;
- How to locate and connect with a VA MST Coordinator; and
- How Vet Centers can also provide counseling and referrals for those who have experienced MST.

Through the Transition Assistance Program, VA also informs transitioning Servicemembers of where to find MST-related information including the MST Fact Sheet and other VA resources on VA.gov. Information about VA's MST-related services is also provided through the Separation Health Assessment and DoD's Safe Helpline for Servicemembers who experience sexual assault during their service.

Finally, VA utilizes an online presence by publishing MST-related information across its public-facing Web sites and social media channels. One such VA Fact Sheet for Veterans filing claims for MST-related disability conditions provides guidance, including how VA can assist even if the assault was never reported.

Culture Change

VBA continues to maintain focus on MST-related claims and ensure Veterans who file claims based on MST are properly served. I have personally engaged MST coordinators and claims processors in the field and am committed to ensuring that MST remains a priority topic for our field office leaders. Dr. Lawrence has also made it a priority to emphasize VBA's commitment to supporting those who have experienced MST at all VBA national training conferences.

VBA ensures all staff are trained to assist Veterans with compassion and sensitivity and has mandated that all RO personnel in identified positions complete MST Sensitivity Training VHA developed for VBA. Additionally, in November 2018, VA's Under Secretary for Benefits, Dr. Paul R. Lawrence, released a video emphasizing VBA's commitment to supporting those who have experienced MST, providing treatment to help the healing process, and ensuring compensation for those disabled by MST.

Conclusion

Providing Veterans with the benefits and services they have earned in a manner that honors their service is a priority for VA. Due to the difficult nature of MST, it is particularly critical for VA to ensure all interactions with survivors are compassionate and sensitive. To that end, VA ensures claims are processed by highly-skilled and experienced employees who receive specialized training on MST claims; VHA staff have the information and resources they need to provide streamlined access to specialized, Veteran-centric care, and comprehensive action is taken to improve outreach. There is strong commitment across VA to sustain and enhance these efforts moving forward.