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Department of Veterans Affairs  
Records Management Program

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*Records Management Inspection Report*

National Archives and Records Administration  
October 7, 2016

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is responsible for assessing Federal agencies on the proper management of records in all media within Federal agencies to protect rights, assure government accountability, and preserve and make available records of enduring value.<sup>1</sup> In this capacity, NARA inspects the records management programs of agencies to ensure compliance with the Federal Records Act and its implementing regulations and to investigate specific issues or concerns. NARA then works with agencies to make improvements to their programs based on inspection findings and recommendations.

A successful and compliant program requires senior management support at the highest levels; a clear definition of program objectives, responsibilities, and authorities; allocation of sufficient resources to administer the program; assignment of the program to an appropriate office within the agency's organizational structure; continuous training for records management staff, agency staff, and contractors; and regular internal evaluations to monitor compliance and program effectiveness.

Departmental records management (RM) can be very complex due to the large size of Departments, differences between components, competing programs, and limited resources. In order to successfully implement a Departmental records management program, communication and coordination between the Department and its components are essential. Each component has its own mission and manages its records in accordance with its policies and procedures. However, it is the responsibility of the Departmental records management program to develop Department-wide policies, directives, standards, procedures, guidance, and strategies that enable the components to design and implement compliant and effective records management programs.

NARA is interested in how well Departmental records management programs operate and incorporate records management coordination into organizational business lines and culture. In order to understand these processes more fully, we examined how the Departmental Records Officer (DRO) works with component Records Officers, and how Departmental business lines plan and implement standards, policies, procedures, and other aspects of a records management program.

In Fiscal Year 2016, NARA inspected the records management program at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). NARA conducted this effort under the authority granted it by 44 United States Code (U.S.C.) 2904(c)(7) and 2906 to inspect records management programs and practices of Federal agencies. NARA initiated this inspection as part of a multi-year project to assess the strategic coordination and implementation of records management policies and practices by Departmental Records Officers with the programs within its components.

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<sup>1</sup> 44 U.S.C. Chapter 29, <http://www.archives.gov/about/laws/records-management.html>.

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In addition to being a part of the multi-year project to inspect each of the executive branch departments, NARA was specifically interested in inspecting VA because:

- VA is a large, complex department with large semi-autonomous component agencies or elements.
- VA records are essential for government accountability of veterans' benefits.
- There is high government and public interest in the agency and its functions.
- NARA is looking to discover if there are best practices that can be shared government-wide.

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The VA Records Management Program lacks several basic records management fundamentals and is therefore non-compliant with various aspects of 36 CFR Chapter XII, Subchapter B. There are also other areas of weakness that need to be addressed in order to improve recordkeeping across the VA. The following is a selected list of findings:

- The VA RM program is missing fundamental records management policies and guidance requiring RM training and evaluations. The policies and guidance it does have are inadequate and not properly disseminated.
- The Departmental RM program has not ensured that the VA Central Office (VACO) maintains a current RM Handbook and a current Records Control Schedule, which together establish program objectives, responsibilities, and authorities for the creation, maintenance, and disposition of agency records.
- The VA has a large volume of unscheduled records, particularly those residing in electronic information systems.
- The Departmental RM program, the RM programs in VACO, and Offices of the Assistant Secretaries are in need of leadership and support from the VA Senior Agency Official for Records Management (SAORM). The VA Departmental RM program lacks a strategic plan, which is necessary to develop and implement an effective Department-wide RM program.

Recent developments within the RM program indicate that the VA has the potential to make significant progress towards establishing a fully functional records management program. Within the past two years the VA has hired experienced and knowledgeable RM staff for the Departmental RM program and the RM program of its two largest components - Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and Veterans Health Administration (VHA). The VBA and VHA have established potentially effective records management programs that operate independently of the Department and independently of each other. There are aspects of both programs that could be adopted effectively Department wide. However, improvement will not occur quickly as there are many shortcomings in the VA Departmental RM and VACO programs. The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) RM program functions adequately, though there is room for improvement which can occur through the adoption of RM activities utilized by VHA and VBA.

This report contains 16 findings and 19 recommendations. A complete list of findings and recommendations is included as Appendix C.

NARA requires under 36 CFR 1239 that the VA develop a Plan of Corrective Action (PoCA) that specifies how the Department will support each report recommendation, including a timeline for completion of action steps. NARA will review the proposed action steps and advise the VA on the scope and impact of its PoCA. Upon approval of the PoCA, NARA looks forward to continuing its engagement with the VA and assisting with the implementation of the recommendations.

Given the complexity and scale of the improvements needed to records management within the VA, NARA intends to work closely with VA and to conduct follow up program reviews and future inspections.

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**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
RECORDS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM**

**INSPECTION REPORT**

**INTRODUCTION**

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is responsible for assessing Federal agencies on the proper management of records in all media to protect rights, ensure government accountability, and preserve and make available records of enduring value. In this capacity, NARA inspects the records management programs of agencies to ensure compliance with Federal statutes and regulations and to investigate specific issues or concerns. NARA then works with agencies to make improvements to their programs based on inspection findings and recommendations. NARA inspects records management programs and practices of Federal agencies under the authority granted by 44 United States Code (U.S.C.) 2904(c)(7) and 2906.

In 2015, NARA began a series of inspections of Departmental records management (RM) programs in order to evaluate how effectively these programs operate and coordinate with components. Specifically, NARA has been examining how Departmental Records Officers (DRO) plan and implement standards, policies, procedures, and other aspects of a records management program and how they interact with component Records Officers. This inspection of the records management program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is the third in this Departmental records management series.

Departmental records management can be very complex. Resources are limited, and some departments are large and have many components with a variety of missions and programs. In order to successfully implement a Departmental records management program, communication and coordination between the Department and its components are essential. While each component manages its records in accordance with its own policies and procedures, it is the responsibility of the Departmental records management program to develop Department-wide policies, directives, standards, procedures, guidance, and strategies that enable the components to design and implement compliant and effective records management programs.

A successful and compliant program, whether at the Departmental or component level, requires senior management support at the highest levels; a clear definition of program objectives, responsibilities, and authorities; allocation of sufficient resources to administer the program; assignment of the program to an appropriate office within the agency's organizational structure; continuous training for records management staff; and regular internal evaluations to monitor compliance and program effectiveness.

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## **BRIEF AGENCY DESCRIPTION**

The Federal Government has been assisting veterans since the beginning of the Republic. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, veterans' assistance was expanded to include benefits and pensions not only for veterans, but also for their widows and dependents. Veterans programs operated under a variety of names and within different Departments, including War, Interior, and Treasury, until their first consolidation into the Veterans Bureau in 1921. A second consolidation in 1930 elevated the Veterans Bureau to a Federal administration, and the name changed to the Veterans Administration. In 1989, the Veterans Administration was raised to Department-level status in the executive branch and designated the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Currently, the VA is comprised of a Central Office (VACO) with staff offices that provide specific assistance to the Secretary of the VA (SECVA), seven Assistant Secretaries who advise and support the SECVA, and three Administrations that provide for the delivery of services of benefits to veterans<sup>2</sup>:

- **Veterans Affairs Central Office (VACO)** - operates general administrative functions for SECVA including:
  - Office of the Secretary
  - Personnel
  - Office of the Inspector General
  - Board of Contract Appeals
  - Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization
  - Center for Minority Veterans
  - Office of Employment Discrimination Complaint Adjudication
  - Office of General Counsel
  - Board of Veterans' Appeals
  - Special Assistant to the Secretary for Veterans Service Organizations Liaison
  - Center for Women Veterans
  - Office of Construction & Facilities Management
  - VA Acquisition Academy
  - Chief Business Office, Austin Financial Services Center
  - Austin Automation Center
  
- **Offices of the Assistant Secretaries** - advises and supports the SECVA including:
  - Assistant Secretary for Management
  - Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology
  - Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning
  - Assistant Secretary for Operations, Security, and Preparedness
  - Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration
  - Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs

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<sup>2</sup> 2015 Functional Organization Manual v3.0.



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- Assistant Secretary for Congressional and Legislative Affairs
  - **Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)** - administers a variety of benefits and services that provide financial and other forms of assistance to service members, veterans, their dependents and survivors. These include compensation, education and training, home loans, life insurance, and vocational rehabilitation.
  - **Veterans Health Administration (VHA)** - operates the nation's largest integrated health care system, with more than 1,700 hospitals, clinics, community living centers, domiciliaries, readjustment counseling centers, and other facilities.
  - **National Cemetery Administration (NCA)** - operates 131 national cemeteries in the U.S. and Puerto Rico, providing burial and memorial benefits for eligible service members, veterans, and family members.

### **INSPECTION OBJECTIVE**

The objective of this inspection was to determine how well standards, policies, procedures, and other records management coordination practices at the VA Department-level are implemented to ensure that the Department and its components have effective records management programs and are in compliance with 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Chapter XII, Subchapter B.

### **SCOPE AND PURPOSE**

The purpose of this inspection was to examine how the VA and component RM programs communicate and cooperate in order to develop and implement effective records management within the Department as a whole. This inspection focused specifically on the RM standards, policies, procedures, and practices at the Department level and their impact on components. It also examined the controls the Department has implemented to mitigate risks associated with non-compliant handling of records and information and to ensure that agency policies and procedures are implemented.

VBA, VHA, and NCA (the Administrations) were not in and of themselves subjects of this inspection and are included here only to the extent that they intersect with and, to some degree, rely upon the Departmental program in order to be effective. In addition, VA Central Office (VACO) and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries, while also not initially conceived as subjects of this inspection, have been included here at the request of the VA DRO. Specifically, meetings were held with the VACO Records Officer (RO) and with records liaisons from five of the seven Offices of the Assistant Secretaries. The NARA inspection team found that there was a critical need to address the fundamental records management challenges facing VACO and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries in this report.

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## **METHODOLOGY**

This inspection consisted of site visits and teleconferences with the VA Departmental RM staff as well as records officers and records liaisons from VA Administrations and VACO in Washington, DC. We also visited Veterans Administration Regional Office (VARO) offices in Albuquerque, NM, and St. Louis, MO, and the Veterans Administration Records Management Center (VARMC) offices in St. Louis, MO. We did not visit any VHA or NCA sites (see Appendix D for a complete listing of VA offices visited).

The inspection team members also:

- reviewed records management policies, directives, and other documentation provided by VA (see Appendix A);
- used a detailed checklist based on Federal statutes and regulations as well as NARA guidance to guide the course of the inspection (see Appendix E); and
- reviewed VA responses to the annual Records Management Self-Assessment (RMSA) from 2012 to 2015 and VA's Senior Agency Official for RM (SAORM) Report from 2013-2015.

## **STATUTES AND REGULATIONS**

36 CFR Chapter XII, Subchapter B specifies policies for Federal agencies' records management programs relating to proper records creation and maintenance, adequate documentation, and records disposition. The regulations in this Subchapter implement the provisions of 44 U.S.C. Chapters 21, 29, 31, and 33.

The Federal Records Act requirements for Federal agencies are found in 44 U.S.C. Chapter 31, Records Management by Federal Agencies. At a high level, agency heads are responsible for ensuring several things, including:

- The adequate and proper documentation of agency activities (44 U.S.C. 3101).
- A program of management to ensure effective controls over the creation, maintenance, and use of records in the conduct of their current business (44 U.S.C. 3102(1)).
- Compliance with NARA guidance and regulations and compliance with other sections of the Federal Records Act that give NARA authority to promulgate guidance, regulations, and records disposition authority to Federal agencies (44 U.S.C. 3102(2) and (3)).

The regulations implementing the Federal Records Act are found in 36 CFR Chapter XII, Subchapter B-Records Management. NARA provides additional guidance to agencies at its records management website - <http://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/>.

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## **STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT**

In accordance with 36 CFR 1239 this report contains:

- (1) An executive summary;
- (2) Background and purpose of the inspection;
- (3) Inspection methodology, including offices visited;
- (4) Findings;
- (5) Corrective actions needed and other recommendations; and
- (6) Any necessary appendices, such as summaries of each site visit or the inspection instrument.

## **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **DESCRIPTION OF THE VA RECORDS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM**

The VA Records Management Program, aligned under the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology, lacks several records management fundamentals and is therefore non-compliant with various aspects of 36 CFR Chapter XII, Subchapter B. Some of the foundational elements of a compliant program are:

- senior management support at the highest levels;
- a clear definition of program objectives, responsibilities, and authorities;
- allocation of sufficient resources to administer the program;
- assignment of the program to an appropriate office within the agency's organizational structure;
- continual training for records management staff, including those assigned records management as a collateral duty;
- mandatory records management training for all staff and contractors; and
- regular internal evaluations to monitor compliance and program effectiveness.

Recent developments within the RM program indicate that the VA has the potential to make significant progress towards establishing a fully functional records management program. Within the past two years the VA has hired experienced and knowledgeable RM staff in the Department and in its two largest components - Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and Veterans Health Administration (VHA). The VBA and VHA have established potentially effective records management programs that operate independently of the Department and independently of each other. There are positive aspects of both programs that could be adopted effectively department-wide. However, improvement will not come quickly as there are many shortcomings in the VA Departmental RM and VACO programs. The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) RM program functions adequately, though there is room for improvement, which can occur through the adoption of RM activities utilized by VHA and VBA.

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## EMAIL MANAGEMENT

VA plans to implement the Capstone approach to managing email Department-wide.<sup>3</sup> At the time of the inspection, VA had established a Capstone Working Group with a dedicated project officer consisting of all VA Administrations and Staff Offices. VA is in the process of identifying Capstone and Non-Capstone officials and will submit to NARA the proper forms to use GRS 6.1.<sup>4</sup> The working group meets bi-weekly and is currently working out details to use “Microsoft Office 365” and identify other processes that will have to be adjusted to support the Capstone process. At the time of the inspection, there was no reason to believe that VA was not on track to meet the Directive M-12-18 goal for managing all email electronically.

## FUNDAMENTAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT - DEPARTMENTAL PROGRAM

**Finding 1: The Department RM program has not ensured that the VA Central Office maintains a current RM Handbook and a current Records Control Schedule, which together establish program objectives, responsibilities, and authorities for the creation, maintenance, and disposition of agency records. (36 CFR 1222.26(e) and 36 CFR 1220.34(c))**

The VA publishes and disseminates a set of three documents to establish program objectives, responsibilities, procedures, and authorities: (1) a directive containing program objectives and responsibilities; (2) a handbook containing responsibilities and procedures; and (3) a records control schedule with authorities for the creation, maintenance, and disposition of agency records.

The VA Handbook 6300.1, Records Management Procedures, used by VACO and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries, is dated March 24, 2010, and contains out of date information. For example, the handbook contains incorrect CFR citations, incorrect information about NARA’s loan policy for permanent records, old disposal instructions for records at Federal Records Centers (FRC), and obsolete addresses to FRCs. The handbook refers to the use of Standard Form (SF) 115, Request for Records Disposition Authority, and SF 258, Agreement to Transfer Records to the National Archives of the United States, forms that were replaced by the Electronic Records Archives (ERA) in October 2012.

The Central Office Operating Instruction, OI-1, Records Control Schedule Central Office Staff Offices, is dated June 30, 1967, and includes retention scheduling information that is outdated. This document, used by VACO and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries, contains references to old General Records Schedule (GRS) dispositions as well as references to disposition schedules issued in 1964 without references to new or revised items since that time.

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<sup>3</sup> Guidance on a New Approach to Managing Email Records, <http://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/bulletins/2013/2013-02.html>.

<sup>4</sup> NARA form 1005 (NA-1005), Verification for Implementing GRS 6.1 <http://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/grs.html>.

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VHA, VBA, and NCA are properly maintaining and updating their RM directives, handbooks, and Records Control Schedules (RCS). VACO acknowledged that its handbook and RCS are out of date, and staff stated that they are updating them. It is the Departmental RM Program's responsibility to oversee, and ensure consistency in, the creation of records control/retention schedules and records management guidance.

*Recommendation 1: The Departmental Records Office must update and maintain the VACO handbook and the Records Control Schedule for Central Office Staff Offices and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries to include specific RM roles and responsibilities for all VACO staff, with mandates for implementation of records management policies and procedures in accordance with Federal statutes and regulations.*

**Finding 2: The VA RM program is missing fundamental records management policies and guidance regarding RM training and evaluations. The policies and guidance it does have are inadequate and not properly disseminated. (36 CFR 1220.34(c))**

There are significant gaps in VA Departmental records management policy and guidance as laid out in its VA Handbook 6300.1. For example, 6300.1 states that the VA DRO is responsible for providing training to the Administrations and staff offices. But it lacks detailed information on what must be included in the training, how often the training must be provided, and how employee training will be tracked. The VA Handbook 6300.1 also provides only minimal information about conducting formal, Department-wide evaluations of the RM program and provides no information for integrating RM into the design, development, and implementation of electronic systems.

The VA RM directive and handbook are not disseminated throughout the Department as required by Federal regulation. Dissemination of such documents ensures awareness of VA RM policies, responsibilities, recordkeeping requirements, practices, and procedures. It also helps ensure that the DRO is informed of newly created unscheduled records, of newly deployed information systems, and of new organizational entities that may create and manage records.

*Recommendation 2: The Departmental RM program must update the VA Handbook 6300.1 to include policies and procedures regarding disposition of permanent records, disposal instructions, training, and RM evaluations and disseminate it as required throughout the VA. (36 CFR 1220.34)*

**Finding 3: The VA does not require records management training for all VA staff, and the general RM training it does offer is inadequate and does not meet records management training requirements under 36 CFR 1220.34(f) and OMB/NARA Managing Government Records Directive (M-12-18).**

Throughout the VA, basic records training is provided to all VA staff using the "Privacy and Security Awareness" training course. This training contains a module about handling records and is required by VA Directive and Handbook 6500, Information Security Program. The module, however, does not cover records management requirements described in VA Directive 6300, Records and Information Management, or VA Handbook 6300.1, Records Management

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Procedures. RM staff receive more in-depth RM training from the “Records Management for Records Officers and Records Liaison Officers” training course, but this course is not required by the VA in its directive or handbook.

VHA and VBA have both developed a number of RM training products; however, the training is required for VHA personnel only. These training products could serve as possible models for the Departmental RM program as a whole and for VACO and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries. There is an opportunity for the Departmental and the Administration RM programs to collaborate on the development and adoption of standardized, mandatory RM training throughout the Department.

36 CFR 1220.34(f) specifically requires that agencies provide guidance and training to all agency personnel on their records management responsibilities. As records are now largely created and managed electronically, it is increasingly important that agencies have required RM training programs. As creators and managers of records, all employees should have the necessary training to safeguard records and to ensure compliance with records management statutes and regulations as well as policies, procedures, and guidance. To further emphasize this need, M-12-18 included two provisions regarding training. Item 2.3 required all Agency Records Officers hold the NARA Certificate of Federal Records Management Training by December 31, 2014, which VA has accomplished. Item 2.4 required agencies to establish records management training informing all employees of their records management responsibilities also by December 31, 2014, which the VA has not accomplished.

*Recommendation 3.1: The VA SAORM must work with VA leadership to support and require records management training, including the proper management of electronic records and email for all staff and contractors. Training must cover RM roles and responsibilities for the proper creation, maintenance, preservation, disposition, and access to agency records based on Federal RM statutes and regulations and VA policies and directives. (36 CFR 1220.34(f) and OMB/NARA Managing Government Records Directive (M-12-18))*

*Recommendation 3.2: The DRO and RM staff in collaboration with the RM programs of the Administrations must create a basic records management training course, based on Federal RM statutes and regulations and VA policies and directives and required for all staff, that specifically covers electronic records management, email, and RM roles and responsibilities for the proper creation, maintenance, preservation, disposition, and access to agency records. (36 CFR 1220.34(f) and OMB/NARA Managing Government Records Directive (M-12-18))*

**Finding 4: The VA has a large volume of unscheduled records, particularly those residing in electronic information systems.**

A compliant, effective, and efficient Federal records management program requires that all records be covered by NARA-approved records retention and disposition schedules. Records schedules ensure that records are retained as needed for business purposes, to meet legal and fiscal requirements, and for permanent preservation if of enduring value. Agencies must also ensure that these record schedules are implemented and that records are disposed of in accordance with these NARA-approved schedules.

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All records, regardless of media, need to be scheduled. This includes electronic records. 36 CFR Chapter XII, Subchapter B, Records Management, and OMB Circular A-130, paragraph 8a1(j) and (k) and 8a4 require agencies to identify and schedule all electronic records series and electronic systems and to transfer to NARA when eligible all electronic records that have a permanent retention.

NARA understands that the VA is planning to develop one Department-wide records manual/schedule with a section for each of the Administrations and a section for administrative functions. However, currently some of its retention schedules are 30 to 40 years out of date. VA must address these issues prior to revising its records manual.

In particular, the records retention schedule used by VACO and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries is out of date. It is also difficult to follow, not comprehensive, and includes information that is no longer relevant. For their part, the Administrations have retention schedules that have been updated recently and remain viable. However, even the manuals of the Administrations have items that have not been updated since the 1950s. This indicates that there are records series in the Administrations that need rescheduling and that other newer records may be unscheduled.

M-12-18 Requirement 2.5 requires agencies to work with NARA to identify and report unscheduled records to NARA by December 31, 2016. To implement this requirement, NARA issued a formal memorandum to agencies on May 28, 2013, requiring all agencies to submit an inventory of all unscheduled records on or before December 31, 2013.<sup>5</sup> At this time the only entity that has done so is the VHA.

*Recommendation 4: The VA Departmental RM program in cooperation with the Administrations and VACO must identify and schedule all unscheduled records including electronic records and electronic information systems. (36 CFR 1225, 36 CFR 1236.6, and OMB/NARA Managing Government Records Directive (M-12-18))*

**Finding 5: The VA Departmental RM program does not conduct regular records management evaluations within VACO and the Offices of the Secretary and Assistant Secretaries or monitor the oversight activities of the Administrations.**

Federal regulations require agencies to conduct formal evaluations to measure the effectiveness of records management programs and practices (36 CFR 1220.34(j)). While VHA and VBA have oversight programs that include self-assessments, the VA is not conducting records management oversight with any uniformity Department-wide. At the time of the inspection there was no method in place to evaluate the implementation of records management practices outside of those being conducted by VHA and VBA, and responding to NARA's annual Records Management Self-Assessment. Records management oversight is another area where the VA could enhance coordination and cooperation between the Department and Administrations.

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<sup>5</sup> NARA AC Memorandum to Federal Agency Contacts: NARA/OMB M-12-18 Goals Due On or Before December 31, 2013 (<http://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/memos/ac23-2013.html>).

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Currently, the VA has delegated the evaluation of records programs to Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) who incorporate records questions into a more general administrative inspection. RM gap analysis questions utilized by ERM can provide a starting point for evaluating VA RM programs. RM staff, who are subject matter specialists, should be responsible for providing RM assessment tools to the ERM team that it can use to ensure RM policies and procedures are compliant with Federal regulations. The ERM team should be providing results to the DRO who should be using this information to help improve records management across VA. However, based on the current procedures and practices in place, this is not being done.

The DRO needs to provide guidance, where needed, for conducting evaluations and reporting the results. In addition, the DRO should use the results of the evaluations to identify strengths and weaknesses of the Administrations, VACO, and the Offices of the Secretary and Assistant Secretaries. Once VA establishes an oversight program, the DRO should work with the VACO and Administration ROs to monitor improvement plans and to use the information gathered from evaluations to make improvements Department-wide.

*Recommendation 5: The VA Departmental RM program, working with the Administrations, VACO, and Enterprise Risk Management, must establish effective RM evaluation programs to monitor VA compliance with Federal regulations. (36 CFR 1220.34j)*

*Recommendation 5.1: The VA Departmental RM program, working with the Senior Agency Official for Records Management, must establish effective RM evaluation programs to monitor the records management practices within the Office of the Secretary and Assistant Secretaries to ensure compliance with Federal regulations. (36 CFR 1220.34j)*

**Finding 6: The VA has not established policies and procedures for handling and reporting unauthorized disposals of records to NARA and has not consistently followed NARA reporting procedures in this area.**

One of the consequences of an underdeveloped Departmental records management program is increased risk of unauthorized disposals of records. Federal regulation requires agencies to establish policies and procedures and to notify NARA when unauthorized disposals occur. Agencies then must investigate such incidents, determine their cause, and explain how the situation will be mitigated to prevent future incidents.

A review of VA directives, handbooks, and the RCS for VACO and the three Administrations shows no established policies and procedures for investigating and reporting unauthorized disposals as required by 36 CFR 1230.10(c). The only VA document addressing this requirement is in a draft version of VHA Handbook 6300.1, Records Management, dated July 2015.

In addition, a review of the few cases of unauthorized disposal of records reported by the VA found that the Department has not always responded to requests to report on the status of their investigations. For example, in one case, the VA did not report to NARA that a relevant court case closed in September 2014 until June 20, 2016.



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*Recommendation 6: The VA must establish policies and procedures for handling and reporting to NARA all unauthorized disposal of records (36 CFR 1230.10(c)) and improve procedures for responding to NARA on open investigations in a manner consistent with regulations. (36 CFR 1230.14)*

#### **FUNDAMENTAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT – VA CENTRAL OFFICE (VACO) STAFF OFFICES AND OFFICES OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARIES**

While this inspection was conceived initially as an inspection of the VA Departmental records management program, upon conducting site visits, the NARA team discovered records management weaknesses at VACO and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries. NARA has decided to include VACO and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries in this report because the risk to records in these organizations is high. While the NCA program is also in need of improvement, its records do not appear to be substantially at risk because of the nature of its specialized and specific mission. It has a small number of records series and the way records are created and maintained has not changed substantially overtime. NARA is concerned about the lack of retention schedule updating and other aspects of the NCA RM program and will inspect NCA separately in the future as it was not within the main scope of this inspection of the Department RM Program.

As the scope of this inspection was the Department RM program, the findings and recommendations in this section, while focused on VACO and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries, are directed, at least in part, at the Department. It is one of the responsibilities of a Departmental RM program to provide guidance and assistance to its components in establishing successful programs. There are several things the VA Departmental RM program can be doing to help VACO and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries improve their RM programs.

#### **Finding 7: The VACO Records Officer has not been formally given the roles and responsibilities to establish a records management program.**

36 CFR 1220.34(a) requires agencies to assign records management responsibility to a person and office with appropriate authority within the agency to coordinate and oversee implementation of a comprehensive records management program as outlined in 36 CFR 1220.32.

Documents provided by VA shows that, in addition to the DRO, records officers have been designated for VACO and each of the Administrations. The VACO RO is responsible for the Staff Offices within VACO and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries. A review of the VA RM directive and handbook shows RM responsibilities listed for the CIO and the DRO, but no RM responsibilities are identified for the VACO RO. The three Administrations have directives and handbooks that clearly lay out RM authority and responsibilities, but this is not the case for VACO RO. Instead, the VACO RO's designation and responsibilities were provided in an appointment memo. The VACO RO's authority and responsibilities need to be listed in the VA RM directive and handbook. Since the inspection itself, VA management has begun the process of a formal designation as recommended below.

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*Recommendation 7: The VA SAORM must formally assign the VACO Records Officer the roles and responsibilities needed to establish a records management program. (36 CFR 1220.34(d))*

**Finding 8: While VACO Staff Offices and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries have a network of Records Liaison Officers (RLO), they have not been trained, and they do not understand their roles and responsibilities.**

VACO Staff Offices and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries have staff assigned as RLOs but do not ensure those appointed understand the duties and responsibilities or that records management is being done at all. After meeting with staff representing the RLO network, it became clear to the inspection team that those who have been appointed to this role have not been trained and do not understand their duties. Several interviewed by the inspection team indicated that they have not done anything at all with records because they were never given instructions to do so. It is critical that agencies have staff with RM knowledge in each program office. These are the people who will ensure that records and information are being handled in a compliant manner. Having trained people in such roles is required by 36 CFR 1220.34(d).

*Recommendation 8: VACO Staff Offices and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries, with the support from the Department RM program, must provide training for RLOs and ensure they understand their roles and responsibilities. (36 CFR 1220.34)*

**Finding 9: VACO Staff Offices and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries are not routinely conducting records inventories. (36 CFR 1223.14; 36 CFR 1224.10(c), and 36 CFR 1225.12)**

Conducting regular inventories is required by regulations for the scheduling process, records disposition, and managing essential (vital) records. Records inventories are the foundation of a records management program. Inventories detail what records an office creates and maintains. Accurate inventories are essential for ensuring access to records in order to meet business needs, respond to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, respond to legal discovery, and to identify vital records. Inventories also help to identify unscheduled records. VACO Staff Offices and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries have not conducted records inventories recently, nor have they established file plans or developed methods to fully understand what records are being created and maintained by the various offices.

*Recommendation 9: VACO Staff Offices and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries, with support from the Department RM program, must conduct inventories of existing electronic and non-electronic records to identify scheduled, unscheduled, and vital records. (36 CFR 1223.14, 36 CFR 1224.14 and 36 CFR 1225.12)*

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## RECORDS MANAGEMENT LEADERSHIP

### **Finding 10: The Departmental RM program, the RM programs in VACO, and Offices of the Assistant Secretaries require additional leadership, strategic direction, and support of an active and engaged Senior Agency Official for Records Management.**

As indicated by the findings and recommendations throughout this report, there are weaknesses in the Departmental RM program and the RM programs in VACO and Office of the Assistant Secretaries. Enlisting the support of senior management is essential to enhancing department-wide cooperation and coordination on records management. In 2012, the OMB/NARA *Managing Government Records Directive*, M-12-18 established a national effort to reform records management policies and practices and to develop a 21<sup>st</sup>-century framework for managing Government records. One of the key elements of M-12-18 requires agencies to appoint a Senior Agency Official for Records Management (SAORM) to oversee and review records management programs. One of the purposes for having an SAORM is to provide executive level support, strategic direction, and advocacy, particularly where there are areas that need improvement.

VA senior leadership is working on a reorganization of offices involved in privacy, cybersecurity, and records to improve how VA handles information. Records management programs need to be strengthened as part of this process. The VA has appointed an SAORM at the assistant secretary level who should be responsible for developing the VA RM programs. It is important that the SAORM, senior management, and DRO develop effective communication and coordination strategies. Leveraging SAORM support would greatly enhance efforts to get disparate RM programs across the VA to assist each other and the DRO in improving programs throughout the VA.

The Departmental RM program should develop cooperative projects with SAORM support to help achieve a more cohesive Department-wide RM program. The RM staff throughout the VA should work together under the leadership of the SAORM and DRO in order to meet the overall objective of enhancing the Department-wide RM program.

*Recommendation 10: The VA SAORM must advocate for the development of a comprehensive, efficient, and compliant Departmental records management program through the development of cooperative projects between Departmental, VACO, Offices of the Assistant Secretaries, and Administration RM programs. (OMB/NARA Managing Government Records Directive, M-12-18)*

### **Finding 11: The VA Departmental Records Officer has not fully executed the responsibilities prescribed under VA Handbook 6300.1 to develop, lead, and manage a comprehensive records management program.**

While the VA has established an office with responsibilities for records management headed by a DRO, it became clear during the course of the inspection that the DRO has not assumed or used the authority and responsibilities as outlined in VA Handbook 6300.1 to implement an effective RM program. 36 CFR 1220.34(a) requires agencies to assign records management responsibility to a person and office with the appropriate authority within the agency to coordinate and oversee implementation of an agency-wide comprehensive records management program.

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The VA Handbook 6300.1 Chapter 3 outlines the responsibilities of the VA Records Officer as:

- Lead and manage the VA records management program.
- Establish policy and procedures for administering the program.
- Issue changes to the handbook that are necessary to implement and manage the program.
- Coordinate records management issues with other Federal agencies.
- Provide technical advice and training to VA Administrations and staff offices on establishing and maintaining effective records management programs.
- Serve as the VA liaison with NARA on micrographics management.
- Conduct periodic reviews of records management programs through the Office of Information & Technology Review Program as required by Federal regulations.
- Serve as VA liaison officer with the Department of Defense, the uniformed services, NARA, and other Government agencies on records management matters.
- Serve as authorized agency approving official for Request for Records Disposition Authority and Agreement to Transfer Records to the National Archives.

*Recommendation 11: The SAORM and other appropriate VA senior leadership must ensure that the Department Records Officer performs the responsibilities delineated in VA Handbook 6300.1. (36 CFR 1220.34)*

## **STRATEGIC PLANNING AND INTRA-DEPARTMENTAL COMMUNICATION**

### **Finding 12: The VA Departmental RM program lacks a strategic plan necessary to develop and implement an effective Department-wide RM program.**

Strategic planning is necessary to systematically and effectively establish all the aspects of a functioning and compliant records management program. A strategic plan provides goals and objectives, creates a clear path for implementation, streamlines the efforts that are already being made, and helps prioritize efforts to establish a fully functioning RM program.

The VA Departmental RM program has no strategic plan. As a result, the RM staff tend to be reactive and spend time handling issues in a crisis management mode. Without a strategic plan, it is difficult for the Department to give clear direction or guidance to VACO, the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries, and the Administrations and hampers its ability to identify and prioritize goals and objectives.

To effectively implement a strategic plan will require cooperation and coordination among the Department, VACO, the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries, and the Administrations. VBA and VHA have made strides in improving their programs. Leveraging their successes could benefit the Department-wide RM program. For example, the VHA records management program has developed and implemented training for its records management staff, has up-to-date guidance, and has developed an effective system of communicating and coordinating with its staff in 156 facilities across the nation. VBA conducts regular monthly RM Calls with RMOs at its 59 regional offices. While there is still work for both VBA and VHA to do, the VA Departmental RM program should leverage the good work of these Administrations in order to improve RM programs across the VA.

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*Recommendation 12: VA Departmental RM program staff should develop and implement a strategic plan for the Department in conjunction with the RM staff from the Administrations, VACO, and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries.*

**Finding 13: There is not sufficient and consistent cooperation and collaboration among the VA Departmental, Administration, and VACO records management programs.**

During the course of the inspection, it became clear that the RM programs of the VA Administrations function independently of the Departmental RM program. Each of the three Administrations have developed an RM program with little or no coordination from the Department. The VHA RM program has developed the most robust program within the VA. The VBA RM program is in the beginning stages of developing an effective program, but there is much work to be done. The NCA RM program is functioning, but has no RM training program and has had little coordination with NARA. The RM programs for VACO and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries has obsolete RM guidance and records schedules and has been stagnant for the past 15 years. Its handbook and RCS are not current and basic RM tasks such as conducting records inventories or scheduling its electronic information systems have not been completed.

While the DRO has responsibility to oversee the VA's RM programs, the DRO has little to no direct influence on the RM programs of the Administration, VACO, and Offices of the Assistant Secretaries. The DRO must oversee and coordinate, with support from the VA SAORM, the RM programs within the VA to ensure that they are in compliance with Federal regulations.

Documents provided by the VA show that a VA Records Management Steering Committee was proposed in February 2012 and established in July 2012. The Committee's Charter states that the committee will meet monthly unless otherwise directed by the Committee Chair, produce monthly minutes, develop a comprehensive RM Improvement Plan, and produce quarterly progress reports. While the documents show regular meetings were held in 2013, none of the documents show any further meetings, nor were there any documents showing that an RM Improvement Plan and quarterly progress reports were produced.

At the time of the inspection, the VA DRO stated that the steering committee will hold regular meetings to build collaboration Department-wide. There are policies, procedures, training, and other practices within the Administrations (particularly VBA and VHA) that should be adopted for wider use throughout the agency. Also, the VA has some highly qualified records management staff, and their knowledge and skills should be utilized to improve the RM programs throughout the agency. The steering committee would be a good forum for this as well as for sharing other ideas, information, and action plans.

*Recommendation 13: The VA Departmental RM program and component RM programs should develop, with the support of the SAORM, inter-administration procedures for consistently collaborating and sharing information, training, guidance, policies, and actions.*

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## ELECTRONIC RECORDS MANAGEMENT AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

### **Finding 14: The VA does not integrate records management and recordkeeping requirements into its electronic systems.**

When it comes to the management of electronic data, VA OCIO's main focus has been privacy and cybersecurity, areas where the VA has had high profile challenges. The role that good records management plays in enhancing privacy and cybersecurity is not readily apparent in the planning or implementation of systems. If records, regardless of format, are not properly created and maintained, the potential for having breaches of privacy and cybersecurity increases. Privacy, cybersecurity, and records management are allied disciplines that are performed more effectively when they are coordinated. All three fields concentrate on protecting, securing, and correctly dispositioning electronic information.

The VA RM program is generally not involved in discussions around the management of electronic systems. Excluding records management in this important area puts the VA at risk of not ensuring that records are appropriately created, captured, or maintained, which in turn increases the risk of privacy and security breaches. The VA also risks failing to be able to provide access to records for Freedom of Information Act requests, for legal discovery, and for meeting the business needs of employees, veterans, and others. Conversely, the VA is also at risk of maintaining and releasing too much information through its lack or misuse of disposition authorities.

*Recommendation 14: The VA must integrate records management and recordkeeping requirements into its electronic systems, enhancing privacy and cybersecurity efforts. (36 CFR 1236)*

### **Finding 15: The VA records management program is not recognized as a stakeholder in IT management and is not included in the information system development process.**

There are several areas where the RM program should be included in IT management, most importantly in electronic system development. Currently, RM staff are not included in strategic planning for new systems, do not review requirements, and are not given an opportunity to ensure that recordkeeping requirements for capture, access, and retention are part of design considerations.

NARA Bulletin 2010-02 highlights agency responsibilities under 36 CFR Chapter XII, Subchapter B, Records Management, and OMB Circular A-130, par. 8a1(j) and (k) and 8a4, to incorporate records management into the design, development, and implementation of information systems.<sup>6</sup> By not including the RM program in systems development, the VA is failing to take advantage of the role proper electronic records management plays in good IT management. Also, VA is not in compliance with 36 CFR 1236.10, which requires that agencies do the following to ensure sound management of electronic records:

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<sup>6</sup> NARA Bulletin 2010-02, <http://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/bulletins/2010/2010-02.html>.

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- Assign responsibility for agency wide program to manage of all records created, received, maintained, used, or stored on electronic media.
  - Integrate the management of electronic records with other agency records and information resources management programs.
  - Incorporate electronic records management objectives, responsibilities, and authorities in agency directives.
  - Establish procedures for addressing records management requirements before approving new electronic information system or enhancements to existing systems.
  - Develop and maintain up-to-date documentation about all electronic information systems that specifies all technical characteristics necessary for reading or processing the records.
  - Specify the location, manner, and media in which electronic records will be maintained to meet operational and archival requirements, and maintain inventories of electronic information systems.
  - Secure NARA approval of records disposition schedules and ensure implementation of their provisions.
  - Ensure compliance with applicable Government-wide policies, procedures, and standards such as those issued by NARA and other Federal agencies.
  - Review electronic information system periodically for conformance to established agency procedures, standards, and policies as part of the periodic reviews required by 44 U.S.C. 3506.

To bring the VA electronic records, IT security, and IT management into compliance with 36 CFR 1236.10 and to ensure the integration of recordkeeping requirements in information and data management strategies, tactics, designs, and implementations, the SAORM should determine where records management must be included in policies and procedures for IT management and systems development and update these accordingly.

*Recommendation 15.1: The VA must update its policies and procedures for IT management and systems development to include records management in the design, development, and implementation of information systems. (36 CFR 1236 Subpart B)*

*Recommendation 15.2: The VA must maintain and make available to RM staff up-to-date documentation about electronic information systems that specifies all technical characteristics necessary for reading and processing records contained in systems, defines the contents of the files and records, indicates restrictions on access and use, describes update cycles or conditions and rules for adding, changing, or deleting information in the system, and contains authorized disposition authorities. (36 CFR 1236.26(b))*

**Finding 16: The VA Information Resources Management Strategic Plan does not adequately recognize or incorporate records management.**

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) requires agencies to develop and maintain an Information Resources Management (IRM) plan (44 U.S.C. 3506(b)(2)). VA has such a plan for FY 2013-2016; however, this plan does not adequately recognize and/or incorporate records management as required by 44 U.S.C. 3506(f). RM should be incorporated and/or recognized in the IRM's strategic goals or objectives.

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By separating records management from information management, the VA and the OCIO weaken VA RM program's policies, procedures, and requirements for records and information. IRM plans naturally include data management strategies, tactics, designs, and proposals for systems that create and maintain records. This includes new systems, existing systems, and those being retired. By not recognizing records and records management in the IRM, agency systems may not fully manage records appropriately from design through the life of the system.

This disconnect between RM and IRM also puts VA at risk of being non-compliant with 36 CFR 1236.12, which states:

As part of the capital planning and systems development life cycle processes, agencies must ensure:

- (a) That records management controls (see §1236.10) are planned and implemented in the system.
- (b) That all records in the system will be retrievable and usable for as long as needed to conduct agency business (i.e., for their NARA-approved retention period). Where the records will need to be retained beyond the planned life of the system, agencies must plan and budget for the migration of records and their associated metadata to new storage media or formats in order to avoid loss due to media decay or technology obsolescence. (See §1236.14)
- (c) The transfer of permanent records to NARA in accordance with part 1235 of this subchapter.
- (d) Provision of a standard interchange format (e.g., ASCII or XML) when needed to permit the exchange of electronic documents between offices using different software or operating systems.

VA is also at risk of being non-compliant with 36 CFR 1222.26, which states:

To ensure the adequate and proper documentation of agency programs, each program must develop recordkeeping requirements that identify:

- (a) The record series and systems that must be created and maintained to document program policies, procedures, functions, activities, and transactions;
- (b) The office responsible for maintaining the record copies of those series and systems, and the applicable system administrator responsible for ensuring authenticity, protection, and ready retrieval of electronic records;
- (c) Related records series and systems;
- (d) The relationship between paper and electronic files in the same series; and



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(e) Policies, procedures, and strategies for ensuring that records are retained long enough to meet programmatic, administrative, fiscal, legal, and historical needs as authorized in a NARA-approved disposition schedule.

Additionally, the Department risks being unable to meet the M-12-18 goal to manage permanent electronic records in electronic format by December 31, 2019.

Including the Departmental RM programs in the IRM and system design strategic planning would also satisfy 36 CFR 1236.20, which states that recordkeeping systems must be able to declare, capture, organize, maintain security, manage access and retrieval, preserve records, and execute disposition.

*Recommendation 16: The VA must fully incorporate records management and recordkeeping requirements into the goals and objectives of IRM strategic planning. (44 U.S.C. 3506(b) and 36 CFR 1222.26)*

## **CONCLUSION**

The Departmental VA records management program lacks several basic elements of a compliant program as prescribed in 36 CFR Chapter XII, Subchapter B. It will require careful strategic planning in order for it to become effective and compliant in the many areas where it is currently underdeveloped. The Department must design a multi-year strategic plan and monitor all aspects of it through full implementation. In particular, it is essential that the SAORM establish a culture of including records management into the regular and routine practices of all program functions within the VA.

Recent developments within the RM program indicate that the VA has the potential to make significant progress towards establishing a fully functional records management program. Within the past two years the VA has hired experienced and knowledgeable RM staff in the Department and in its two largest components - VBA and VHA. While this inspection did not include a comprehensive assessment of either of these Administrations, it was apparent that VBA and VHA have implemented policies, procedures, and training that could be shared and utilized by the Department as a whole.

While initial impressions of the VBA and VHA programs were favorable, the NARA team discovered critical records management weaknesses at VACO and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries. Despite the fact that this was conceived as a Departmental inspection, NARA has determined that VACO and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries records are at high risk and thus decided to include findings and recommendations for those organizations in this report. While the NCA program is also underdeveloped, its records do not appear to be substantially at risk because of the nature of its specialized mission, consequently this report makes no recommendations that are NCA specific. NARA will at a future date conduct more thorough records management inspections of the three VA Administrations and of VACO to include the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries.

Given the complexity and scale of the improvements recommended, NARA intends to conduct follow up program reviews and future inspections of the Department and its Administrations.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **RELEVANT PRE-INSPECTION DOCUMENTS**

- 2013-2015 Senior Agency Official Report
- 2012-2015 Records Management Self-Assessment Responses
- VA 2014-2020 Strategic Plan, not dated
- VA 2015 Functional Organization Manual Version 3.0, not dated
- VA FY 2013-2015 Enterprise Road Map, March 28, 2014
- VA FY 2013-2015 Information Resources Management Strategic Plan, March 28, 2014
- Office of Information and Technology 2016-2020 Planning Guidance, dated April 28, 2014
- Office of Inspector General Internal Inspection Reports
- Department, Component, and RM Organizational Charts
- Department and Component Websites
- Department and Component RM Directives and Handbooks
- Department and Component Record Control Schedules
- VA Directive 6300, Records and Information Management
- VA Handbook 6300.1, Records Management Procedures
- NCA Directive 6300, NCA Records and Information Management
- NCA Handbook 6300, NCA Records and Information Management Procedures
- VHA Directive 6300, Records Management
- VHA Handbook 6300.1 Records Management
- OI-1 Records Control Schedule Central Office Staff Offices, June 30, 1967
- VHA Records Control Schedule 10-1, March 1, 2011
- VBA Records Control Schedule VB-1, Parts 1 and 2, January 31, 2014
- NCA Records Control Schedule for the National Cemetery Administration

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## **APPENDIX B AUTHORITIES AND FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS**

### AUTHORITIES

- 44 U.S.C. Chapter 29
- 36 CFR Chapter XII, Subchapter B
- 36 CFR 1239, Program Assistance and Inspections

### OTHER GUIDANCE

- OMB/NARA Managing Government Records Directive, M-12-18
- OMB/NARA Guidance on Managing Email, M-14-16
- Other NARA Bulletins currently in effect

### FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS

- ACTION PLAN

The Department of Veterans Affairs will submit to NARA a Plan of Corrective Action (PoCA) that specifies how the agency will address each inspection report recommendation, including a timeline for completion and proposed progress reporting dates.

The plan must be submitted within 60 days after the date of transmittal of the final report to the head of the agency.

NARA intends to work closely and to conduct follow up program reviews and future inspections of VA Administrations and VACO records management programs individually.

- PROGRESS REPORTS

The VA will submit to NARA progress reports on the implementation of the action plan until all actions are completed.

- NARA REVIEW

NARA will analyze the adequacy of the VA's action plan, provide comments to the VA on the plan within 60 days of receipt, assist the VA in implementing recommendations, and inform the VA when progress reports are no longer needed.

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**APPENDIX C**  
**COMPLETE LIST OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Finding 1: The Department RM program has not ensured that the VA Central Office maintains a current RM Handbook and a current Records Control Schedule, which together establish program objectives, responsibilities, and authorities for the creation, maintenance, and disposition of agency records. (36 CFR 1222.26(e) and 36 CFR 1220.34(c))**

Recommendation 1: The Department Records Office must update and maintain the VACO handbook and the Records Control Schedule for Central Office Staff Offices and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries to include specific RM roles and responsibilities for all VACO staff and to include mandates for implementation of records management policies and procedures in accordance with Federal statutes and regulations.

**Finding 2: The VA RM program is missing fundamental records management policies and guidance regarding RM training and evaluations. The policies and guidance it does have are inadequate and not properly disseminated. (36 CFR 1220.34(c))**

Recommendation 2: The Departmental RM program must update the VA Handbook 6300.1 to include policies and procedures regarding disposition of permanent records, disposal instructions, training, and RM evaluations and disseminate it as required throughout the VA. (36 CFR 1220.34)

**Finding 3: The VA does not require records management training for all VA staff, and the general RM training it does offer is inadequate and does not meet records management training requirements under 36 CFR 1220.34(f) and OMB/NARA *Managing Government Records Directive* (M-12-18.)**

Recommendation 3.1: The VA SAORM must work with VA leadership to support and require records management training, including electronic records management and email for all staff and contractors that specifically covers RM roles and responsibilities for the proper creation, maintenance, preservation, disposition and access to agency records based on Federal RM statutes and regulations and VA policies and directives. (36 CFR 1220.34 and OMB/NARA *Managing Government Records Directive* (M-12-18))

Recommendation 3.2: The DRO and RM staff in collaboration with the RM programs of the Administrations must create a basic records management training course, based on federal RM statutes and regulations and VA policies and directives and required for all staff, that specifically covers electronic records management, email, and RM roles and responsibilities for the proper creation, maintenance, preservation, disposition, and access to agency records. (36 CFR 1220.34 and OMB/NARA *Managing Government Records Directive* (M-12-18))

**Finding 4: The VA has a large volume of unscheduled records, particularly those residing in electronic information systems.**

Recommendation 4: The VA Departmental RM program in cooperation with the Administrations and VACO must identify and schedule all unscheduled records including electronic records and electronic information systems. (36 CFR 1225, 36 CFR 1236.6, and OMB/NARA *Managing Government Records Directive (M-12-18)*)

**Finding 5: The VA Departmental RM program does not conduct regular records management evaluations within VACO and the Offices of the Secretary and Assistant Secretaries or monitor the oversight activities of the Administrations.**

Recommendation 5: The VA Departmental RM program, working with the Administrations, VACO, and Enterprise Risk Management, must establish effective RM evaluation programs to monitor VA compliance with Federal regulations. (36 CFR 1220.34j)

Recommendation 5.1: The VA Departmental RM program, working with the Senior Agency Official for Records Management must establish effective RM evaluation programs to monitor the records management practices within the Office of the Secretary and Assistant Secretaries to ensure compliance with Federal regulations. (36 CFR 1220.34j)

**Finding 6: The VA has not established policies and procedures for handling and reporting unauthorized disposals of records to NARA and has not consistently followed NARA reporting procedures in this area.**

Recommendation 6: The VA must establish policies and procedures for handling and reporting to NARA all unauthorized disposal of records (36 CFR 1230.10(c)) and improve procedures for responding to NARA on open investigations in a manner consistent with regulations. (36 CFR 1230.14)

**Finding 7: The VACO Records Officer has not been formally given the roles and responsibilities to establish a records management program.**

Recommendation 7: The VA SAORM must formally give the VACO Records Officer the roles and responsibilities needed to establish a records management program. (36 CFR 1220.34(d))

**Finding 8: While VACO Staff Offices and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries have a network of Records Liaison Officers (RLO), they have not been trained, and they do not understand their roles and responsibilities.**

Recommendation 8: VACO Staff Offices and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries, with the support from the Department RM program, must provide training for RLOs and ensure they understand their roles and responsibilities. (36 CFR 1220.34)

**Finding 9: VACO Staff Offices and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries are not routinely conducting records inventories. (36 CFR 1223.14, 36 CFR 1224.10 (c) and 36 CFR 1225.12)**

Recommendation 9: VACO Staff Offices and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries, with support from the Department RM program, must conduct inventories of existing electronic and non-electronic records to identify scheduled, unscheduled, and vital records. (36 CFR 1223.14, 36 CFR 1224.14 and 36 CFR 1225.12)

**Finding 10: The Departmental RM program, the RM programs in VACO, and Offices of the Assistant Secretaries require additional leadership, strategic direction and support of an active and engaged Senior Agency Official for Records Management.**

Recommendation 10: The VA SAORM must support the development of a comprehensive, efficient, and compliant Departmental records management program through the development of cooperative projects between Departmental, VACO, Offices of the Assistant Secretaries, and Administration RM programs. (OMB/NARA *Managing Government Records Directive (M-12-18)*)

**Finding 11: The VA Departmental Records Officer has not fully executed responsibilities prescribed under VA Handbook 6300.1 to fully develop, lead, and manage a comprehensive records management program.**

Recommendation 11: The SAORM and other appropriate VA senior leadership must ensure that the Department Records Officer performs the responsibilities delineated in VA Handbook 6300.1. (36 CFR 1220.34)

**Finding 12: The VA Departmental RM program lacks a strategic plan necessary to develop and implement an effective Department-wide RM program.**

Recommendation 12: VA Departmental RM program staff should develop and implement a strategic plan for the Department in conjunction with the RM staff from the Administrations, VACO, and the Offices of the Assistant Secretaries.

**Finding 13: There is not consistent and sufficient cooperation and collaboration among the VA Departmental, Administration, and VACO records management programs.**

Recommendation 13: The VA Departmental RM program and component RM programs should develop, with the support of the SAORM, inter-administration procedures for consistently collaborating and sharing information, training, guidance, policies, and actions.

**Finding 14: The VA does not integrate records management and recordkeeping requirements into its electronic systems.**

Recommendation 14: The VA must integrate records management and recordkeeping requirements into its electronic systems enhancing privacy and cybersecurity efforts. (36 CFR 1236)

**Finding 15: The VA records management program is not recognized as a stakeholder in IT management and is not included in the information system development process.**

Recommendation 15.1: The VA must update its policies and procedures for IT management and systems development to include records management in the design, development, and implementation of information systems. (36 CFR 1236 Subpart B).

Recommendation 15.2: The VA must maintain and make available to RM staff up-to-date documentation about electronic information systems that specifies all technical characteristics necessary for reading and processing records contained in systems, defines the contents of the files and records, indicates restrictions on access and use, describes update cycles or conditions and rules for adding, changing, or deleting information in the system, and contains authorized disposition authorities. (36 CFR 1236.26(b))

**Finding 16: The VA Information Resources Management Strategic Plan does not adequately recognize or incorporate records management.**

Recommendation 16: The VA must fully incorporate records management and recordkeeping requirements into the goals and objectives of IRM strategic planning. (44 U.S.C. 3506(b) and 36 CFR 1222.26)

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**APPENDIX D**  
**OFFICES VISITED/INTERVIEWED/PROJECTS REVIEWED DURING INSPECTION**

Department of Veterans Affairs Headquarters, Washington, DC, January 12 - 14, 2016

- Enterprise Records Service
- National Cemetery Administration (NCA)
- Office of Human Resources and Administration
- Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs
- Veterans Health Administration (VHA)
- Office of Policy and Planning
- Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)
- Office of Management
- Office of Operations, Security and Preparedness

VA Regional Office, Albuquerque, NM, February 3, 2016

VA Records Management Center and VA Regional Office, St. Louis, MO, February 25, 2016



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## APPENDIX E

### SELECTED COMPLIANCE QUESTIONS

#### **Specific Questions/Areas Addressed:**

- Responsibility and governance as they relate to the implementation and oversight of the Department's RM Program
- Dissemination of records management directives and other issuances
- Knowledge and experience of RM staff and training provided to RM staff, agency employees, and contractors
- Assignment of records management responsibilities to program and administrative units
- Coordination of RM program activities among the departmental components and communication of RM requirements to and within departmental components
- Senior management support ensuring adequate resources (time, budget) for their RM staff and other business line staff to administer the program and to pursue training, professional development, and continuing education opportunities
- The RM program ensures that recordkeeping requirements are embedded into business functions providing adequate documentation of the agency's activities
- The RM program has oversight ensuring that the agency has effective controls in place to manage records created by staff and contractors and to manage records created and shared in multi-agency environments
- Records scheduling is coordinated among the agency components including developing and monitoring the implementation of records schedules and the dissemination of records schedules changes
- All agency records schedules for existing paper and other non-electronic records are submitted to NARA by December 31, 2016 (M-12-18 Goal 2.5)
- Records disposition is coordinated among the agency components including the transfer of inactive records to storage, the transfer of eligible permanent records to NARA, and the tracking of all records dispositions
- The RM program identification, care, maintenance, storage, and handling of all permanent records regardless of format

- Electronic records management objectives, responsibilities, authorities and guidance are incorporated in pertinent agency directives, disseminated to agency components, and monitored for compliance
- Goals, objectives, and plans to manage both permanent and temporary email records in an accessible electronic format by December 31, 2016 (M-12-18 Goal 1.2)
- Goals, objectives, and plans to implement the goal to manage all permanent electronic records in an electronic format by December 31, 2019 (M-12-18 Goal 1.1)
- Electronic records management objectives, responsibilities, authorities, and guidance for utilizing cloud services (M-12-18 Goal A4.1)
- Electronic records migration strategies are designed and implemented by the agency and components to ensure electronic records are maintained to meet business purposes and to comply with NARA-approved retention schedules
- The RM program identification of eligibility and coordination of electronic permanent records for transfer to NARA including format and metadata requirements (NARA Bulletin 2015-01 and NARA Bulletin 2015-04)
- Risk management including identifying, analyzing, and assessing risks to the integrity, authenticity, reliability, usability, and preservation of its records and information
- The RM program has a coordinated program of evaluations/inspections/audits, conducted on an annual cycle or similar, to ensure the records management program is efficient, effective, and compliant
- The RM program conducts and coordinates RM training to ensure that those individuals with responsibility for records management have adequate training and professional development consistent with their responsibilities

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**APPENDIX F**  
**ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

ASCII	American Standard Code for Information Interchange
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
DC	District of Columbia
DRO	Departmental Records Officer
ERA	Electronic Records Archives
ERM	Enterprise Risk Management
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
FRC	Federal Records Center
GRS	General Records Schedules
IRM	Information Resources Management
IT	Information Technology
MO	Missouri
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration
NCA	National Cemetery Administration
NM	New Mexico
OCIO	Office of the Chief Information Officer
OIG	Office of Inspector General
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
PoCA	Plan of Corrective Action
RCS	Records Control Schedule
RIM	Records and Information Management
RLO	Records Liaison Officer
RM	Records Management
RMSA	Records Management Self-Assessment
RO	Records Officer
SAORM	Senior Agency Official for Records Management
SECVA	Secretary of the VA
SF	Standard Form
U.S.C.	United States Code

VA	Veterans Administration
VACO	Veterans Administration Central Office
VARO	Veterans Administration Regional Office
VARMC	Veterans Administration Records Management Center
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration
VHA	Veterans Health Administration
XML	Extensible Markup Language



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