

**2003 VBA SURVEY OF
MEDICAL EXAMINERS' AND CORONERS'
PROCESS IN IDENTIFICATION OF UNCLAIMED REMAINS
FOR VETERAN STATUS**

Conducted for the:

Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Benefits Administration
Compensation and Pension Service
Veterans Services Staff

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Compensation and Pension (C&P) Service of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), conducted The Survey of Medical Examiners and Coroners to determine the process they use to ascertain the veteran status of decedents whose remains are unclaimed. The survey was precipitated by a recent incident in Chicago where local authorities did not contact VA prior to burying the decedents who were subsequently identified as veterans. This incident sparked a congressional inquiry concerning the process used by VA to ensure that remains of unclaimed veterans received the respect they have earned.

This study was designed to gather basic information on the relative number of unclaimed decedents throughout the nation in a year and the current steps that medical examiners, coroners, and others who have the responsibility for the disposition of these remains take to determine the veteran status of the decedents.

The major findings of this study were:

- The responsibilities typically thought of as being under the authority of a medical examiner or coroner may be assigned to a justice of the peace or, in rural areas, to a county sheriff, who may or may not have the additional title of coroner.
- The number of people who serve in this function appears to be constantly changing.
- Only 15% of medical examiners and coroners reported that they attempted to verify the veteran status of identified, unclaimed decedents all of the time during the period from January 1997 to August 2001. Conversely, 75% never made such an attempt.
- The most common reason for not attempting to verify the veteran status of identified, unclaimed decedents during this period was that there were no such cases. This reason was mentioned by 65% of those asked this question.
- While only 6% of the jurisdictions reporting any identified unclaimed decedents had 51 or more such cases, this group accounted for 61% of all cases reported.
- More than half (54%) of all jurisdictions reported that they kept records on identified, unclaimed decedents. Most (69%) of those keeping records, reported that records are kept indefinitely.
- Currently, over one in three (36%) of jurisdictions reported that they attempt to verify the veteran status of identified, unclaimed decedents compared to the 17% who made such an attempt all (15%) or most (2%) of the time between January 1997 and August 2001. Among those jurisdictions that had at least one identified, unclaimed decedent in the last 12 months, three in five (60%) currently attempt to verify veteran status.
- Verification requests are most often (57%) made to the Department of Veterans Affairs with an additional 27% of such requests made to various state and county offices.

BACKGROUND

The Veterans Services Staff, C&P Service was charged with surveying the nation's medical examiners and coroners (ME/C) to determine the process they use to ascertain the veteran status of identified decedents whose remains were unclaimed. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi directed this survey after the unclaimed remains of individuals in Chicago, who were in fact veterans, were buried in pauper graves. The local authorities had not contacted the VA to determine the veteran status of the decedents. This incident sparked a congressional inquiry concerning the process used by VA to ensure that unclaimed remains of veterans are buried in veteran cemeteries.

Before VA could develop an effective outreach program for medical examiners/coroners that will make sure that the unclaimed remains of veterans are given the respect they have earned, there needed to be an understanding of the level of knowledge among the ME/C professionals throughout the nation about both the need to identify the veteran status of unclaimed decedents and the process of how this can be done in an effective and timely manner. This study was designed to meet these needs.

METHODOLOGY

The first step in the study was to develop a complete list of medical examiners, coroners, and others who serve this function throughout the nation. While no such list exists in one place, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) maintain a count of those who are responsible for the determination of deaths as part of their Death Investigation System. Prior to the start of this study, the CDC Death Investigation System reported that there were 3,158 individuals with this responsibility.[\[1\]](#) The CDC count had grown to 3,184 at the time that this study began. This was the number of individuals for whom an attempt was made to obtain contact information (name, address, phone number, etc.). The distribution of ME/Cs by state is shown in Table 1, next page.

Lists of ME/Cs were available from a variety of sources. Several states had this information on their Web site or a linked Web site. Other states provided this information in electronic format upon request. In a few states, government directories of all office holders were purchased and the appropriate information was key-entered into the master database. Lastly, a small number of lists were provided by the chair of the state professional association of ME/Cs.

Throughout the study, the number of jurisdictions continued to change. This came about for three reasons. First, the list from several states reported a different number of jurisdictions (more or less) than anticipated. These states were contacted to confirm that the list was complete.

TABLE 1

CDC Death Investigation Systems by State – October 30, 2002

State	# Counties	# Jurisdictions	State	# Counties	# Jurisdictions	State	# Counties	# Jurisdictions
Alabama	67	69	Kentucky	120	121	North Dakota	53	53
Alaska	27	1	Louisiana	64	64	Ohio	88	88
Arizona	15	15	Maine	16	1	Oklahoma	77	1
Arkansas	75	76	Maryland	23	1	Oregon	36	37
California	58	58	Massachusetts	14	65	Pennsylvania	67	67
Colorado	63	63	Michigan	83	84	Rhode Island	5	1
Connecticut	8	1	Minnesota	87	87	South Carolina	46	46
Delaware	3	1	Mississippi	82	83	South Dakota	95	100
D of Columbia	1	1	Missouri	115	115	Tennessee	254	846
Florida	67	24	Montana	56	57	Texas	29	1
Georgia	156	160	Nebraska	93	93	Utah	14	1
Hawaii	5	5	Nevada	17	17	Vermont	135	1
Idaho	44	45	New Hampshire	10	1	Virginia	39	39
Illinois	102	102	New Jersey	21	22	Washington	55	1
Indiana	92	92	New Mexico	33	1			

Iowa	99	100	New York	62	58	West Virginia	72	72
Kansas	105	31	North Carolina	100	25	Wisconsin	23	23
						Wyoming		
					Total Counties..... 3,140			
					Total Jurisdictions..... 3,184			

Second, in several states, the same medical examiner is responsible for more than one county. Specifically, nine states have a total of 16 multi-county jurisdictions covering 48 counties. Third, Texas, with 846 jurisdictions, is in the midst of consolidating. A total of nine such consolidations have been identified during this study. However, it should be kept in mind that there may be additional consolidations among the 185 jurisdictions that did not respond to this survey.

Table 2, next page, shows the number of jurisdictions initially anticipated as well as the reduced number of jurisdictions found at the conclusion of this study.

ME/Cs were initially sent a short questionnaire by mail on January 14, 2003. (A copy of the questionnaire appears in Appendix A.) A second mailing was sent to those who did not respond to the first mailing on February 16. The cover letter asked respondents to mail the completed questionnaire in the enclosed envelope or to fax their questionnaire to the offices of the survey contractor, Schulman, Ronca & Bucuvalas, Inc. (SRBI). In addition, there were also instructions on completing the questionnaire via the Internet.

TABLE 2

Initial and Revised Number of Jurisdictions by State								
State	Initial	Revised	State	Initial	Revised	State	Initial	Revised
Alabama	69	70	Kentucky	121	120	North Dakota	53	61
Alaska	1	1	Louisiana	64	64	Ohio	88	86

Arizona	15	8	Maine	1	1	Oklahoma	1	1
Arkansas	76	74	Maryland	1	1	Oregon	37	31
California	58	58	Massachusetts	65	8	Pennsylvania	67	67
Colorado	63	63	Michigan	84	66	Rhode Island	1	1
Connecticut	1	1	Minnesota	87	73	South Carolina	46	46
Delaware	1	1	Mississippi	83	82	South Dakota	66	63
D of Columbia	1	1	Missouri	115	107	Tennessee	100	108
Florida	24	22	Montana	57	57	Texas	846	831
Georgia	160	159	Nebraska	93	92	Utah	1	1
Hawaii	5	3	Nevada	17	14	Vermont	1	1
Idaho	45	44	New Hampshire	1	1	Virginia	1	1
Illinois	102	102	New Jersey	22	18	Washington	39	39
Indiana	92	92	New Mexico	1	1	West Virginia	1	1
Iowa	100	98	New York	58	140	Wisconsin	72	72
Kansas	31	19	North Carolina	25	10	Wyoming	23	23
				Total Initial..... 3,184				
				Total Revised..... 3,104				

Individuals who had not responded to either of the mailings, and for whom we did not have a fax number or e-mail address, were contacted by phone beginning February 26. A fax containing the cover letter (with Internet response instructions) and questionnaire were sent to 428 individuals on February 28. E-mails were sent to 75 non-responders, including 19 who had received a fax, on March 6. The instructions in the e-mail advised this group to print the questionnaire and fax the completed response to SRBI as well as instructions on how to respond via the Internet. Those who did not respond to the fax or e-mail were also contacted by phone.

A five-call protocol was used in the telephone phase. That is, up to five attempts were made to contact an individual. Once contacted, interviewers would complete the interview, make an appointment to complete the interview, or get the name of a more appropriate individual to complete the interview. If the name and phone number of a different person was offered, the process would begin again with 5 attempts made to contact the new individual.

Interviews were completed with 2,409 ME/Cs as a result of these efforts. Table 3 shows the number of responses by mode of contact.

TABLE 3

Response by Mode			
Mode	Number	Total Sample	Complete
Mail	1,205	39%	50%
Fax	229	7%	10%
Internet	49	2%	2%
Phone	926	30%	38%
<i>Total Complete</i>	<i>2,409</i>	<i>78%</i>	<i>100%</i>
Did not respond	696	22%	NA
Total	3,104	100%	100%

Response rates by state are shown in Table 4, next page.

TABLE 4

Response Rate by State

State	Number Mailed	Number Completed	Response Rate	State	Number Mailed	Number Completed	Response Rate
Alabama	70	54	77%	Nebraska	92	64	70%
Alaska	1	1	100%	Nevada	14	11	79%
Arizona	8	7	88%	New Hampshire	1	1	100%
Arkansas	74	54	73%	New Jersey	18	13	72%
California	58	47	81%	New Mexico	1	1	100%
Colorado	63	49	78%	New York	140	100	71%
Connecticut	1	1	100%	North Carolina	10	5	50%
Delaware	1	1	100%	North Dakota	61	47	77%
D of Columbia	1	1	100%	Ohio	86	78	91%
Florida	22	19	86%	Oklahoma	1	1	100%
Georgia	159	104	65%	Oregon	31	25	81%
Hawaii	3	2	67%	Pennsylvania	67	55	82%
Idaho	44	40	91%	Rhode Island	1	1	100%
Illinois	102	87	85%	South Carolina	46	42	91%
Indiana	92	68	74%	South Dakota	63	54	86%
Iowa	98	75	77%	Tennessee	108	67	62%
Kansas	19	15	79%	Texas	831	646	78%

Kentucky	120	107	89%	Utah	1	1	100%
Louisiana	64	48	75%	Vermont	1	1	100%
Maine	1	1	100%	Virginia	1	1	100%
Maryland	1	1	100%	Washington	39	36	92%
Massachusetts	8	5	63%	West Virginia	1	1	100%
Michigan	66	54	82%	Wisconsin	72	66	92%
Minnesota	73	55	75%	Wyoming	23	20	87%
Mississippi	82	57	70%				
Missouri	107	69	64%				
Montana	57	50	57%	TOTAL	3,104	2,409	77.6%

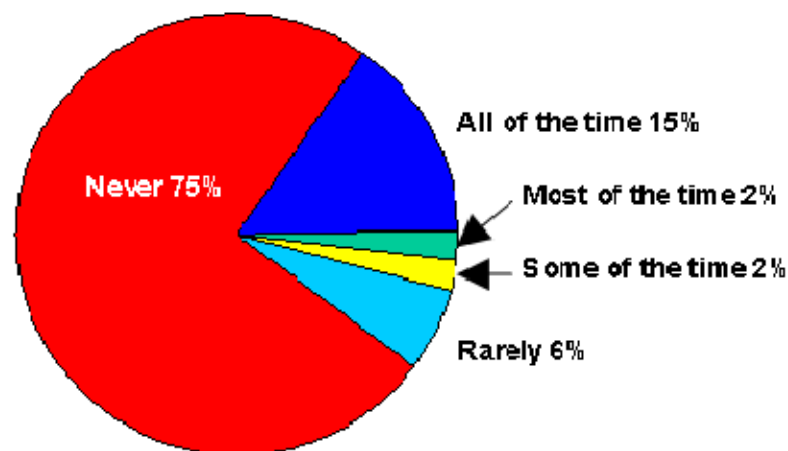
DETAILED FINDINGS

The questionnaire used for this study was designed to collect basic information on the proportion of medical examiners and coroners (ME/C) who do attempt to ascertain the veteran status of identified, unclaimed decedents, as well as obtaining a measure of the proportion who should attempt identification but do not for whatever reason. The first question asked how often an attempt was made to determine the veteran status of identified but unclaimed remains during a four and one-half year period beginning in January 1997. January 1997 was selected because of the implementation of a new work design within the Veteran Service Centers. This new design merged Veterans Service and Adjudication into Business Process Reengineering (BPR) Teams. August 2001 constitutes the data that C&P Service requested the regional offices review their outreach to the ME/C community. The results of this question are shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1

Frequency of Attempt to Verify Veteran Status

(N=2,409)



Q1. From January 1997 to August 2001, how often did your office attempt to verify the veteran status of identified, unclaimed decedents?

Only one in four ME/C had ever attempted to identify a decedent during this period. Specifically, only 15% tried to determine veteran status all of the time.

Those ME/Cs who did not attempt to determine the veteran status every time the situation arose were asked why they did not try to ascertain if the decedent was a veteran in every case. The results are shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5

Why a Determination of Veteran Status was Not Made in Every Case of an Identified, Unclaimed Decedent by Frequency of Verification

Q1. From January 1997 to August 2001, how often did your office attempt to verify the veteran status of identified, unclaimed decedents?

Q2. Please tell us why the determination of veteran status was not attempted in any/all identified, unclaimed decedents during this period?

Base: Attempted to verify veteran status less than all of the time.

	Most of the time(N=49)	Some of the time(N=54)	Rarely(N=149)	Never(N=1,794)	TOTAL(N=2,046)
Never had any cases	12%	4%	17%	72%	65%
Don't have many cases	--	--	24%	1%	2%
Funeral home provides information	--	13%	7%	6%	6%
Family provides information	8%	6%	7%	1%	2%
Information from other source	8%	9%	5%	1%	2%
Not my responsibility	10%	4%	6%	5%	5%
New on the job/No experience	2%	2%	1%	3%	3%
Not aware could/should verify	2%	2%	3%	2%	2%
No formal policy in place	2%	7%	4%	1%	1%
No information on deceased	12%	15%	3%	*	1%
Other	31%	31%	8%	3%	5%
No reason given	12%	7%	15%	4%	5%
TOTAL ⁺	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

-- None.

* Less than 0.5%.

+ Detail may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Overall, the most mentioned reason for not determining veteran status in all cases was that the situation never occurs. This reason was cited by 65% of all ME/Cs who were asked this question and 72% of those who never attempted to determine veteran status during the specified time period. One in four (24%) of those who rarely made such an attempt, and 2% overall, gave as a reason that they rarely have

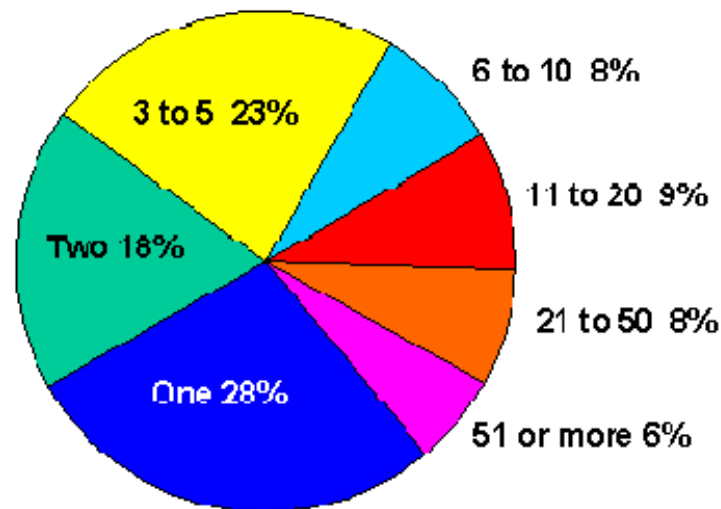
a case of an identified but unclaimed decedent.[2]

Approximately one in ten, overall, received information on the veteran status of the decedent from a funeral home (6%), the family (2%), or some other source (2%). An equal proportion said that obtaining this information was not their responsibility (5%), they were new in the position and had no experience (3%), or they were not aware that they should or could obtain information on the veteran status of decedents.

When asked specifically, only one in five (19%) reported that they had any cases of an identified, unclaimed decedent in the last 12 months. The number of such cases among this group is reported in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2

**Number of Identified Unclaimed
Decedents in Last 12 Months**
(Among those that had at least 1 case, N=450)



Q3. During the past 12 months, approximately how many cases of identified, unclaimed decedents did you have?

Among the 450 jurisdictions who reported at least one identified, unclaimed decedent in the last 12 months, over one in four (27%) had only one such case and almost one in five (18%) had only two cases. Slightly less than four in five (78%) had 10 or fewer cases. Only one in 20 (6%) had 51 or more cases of this type in the last 12 months. ME/Cs who reported at least 51 cases are listed in Table 6 (next page).

TABLE 6

Medical Examiners/Coroners Reporting 51 or More Identified, Unclaimed Decedents in the Last 12 Months		
Q3. During the past 12 months, approximately how many cases of identified, unclaimed decedents did you have?		
State	City	Number
Arizona	Tucson	55
California	San Francisco	259
	San Bernadino	157
	Los Angeles	152
	Oakland	96
	Visalia	74
District of Columbia	Washington	80
Florida	Ft. Lauderdale	200
	Miami	172
Georgia	Albany	150

	Rossville	100
Illinois	Sycamore	419
	Chicago	336
	New Orleans	150
Louisiana		
Mississippi	Columbia	150
Nevada	Carson City	372
	Reno	52
	Albuquerque	200
New Mexico		
Ohio	Cleveland	83
	Cincinnati	58
	Philadelphia	127
Pennsylvania		
Texas	Lancaster	300
	Beaumont	201
	Dallas	200
	Pasadena	70
	Laramie	100
Wyoming		

In total, these 450 jurisdictions reported a total of 7,048 identified, unclaimed decedents. Three-fifths of the total (61%) came from those jurisdictions with 51 or more cases, while 16% came from jurisdictions with 21 to 50 cases and 9% came from jurisdictions with 11 to 20 cases. Jurisdictions with 10 or less cases, accounting for 77% of jurisdictions reporting at least one case, reported only 14% of the cases.

Jurisdictions reporting at least one case were asked how many of the identified, unclaimed decedents were verified as veterans. Overall, in only 912 of the 7,048 cases (13%) was the decedent verified as a veteran.

TABLE 7

Medical Examiners/Coroners Reporting 11 or More Identified, Unclaimed Decedents Identified as Veterans in the Last 12 Months

Q4. During the past 12 months, approximately how many of the identified, unclaimed decedents referred to in Q3 were verified as veterans?

State	City	Number	State	City	Number
Alabama	Lineville	15	Missouri	Brookfield	20
California	San Bernardino	33		St. Louis	12
	Oakland	27	North Dakota	Linton	20
	Los Angeles	25	New Mexico	Albuquerque	20
	San Francisco	20	Nevada	Reno	15
Florida	Ft. Lauderdale	20	New York	New York	20
Idaho	Malad	12	Ohio	Columbus	19
Illinois	Chicago	26	Oregon	Portland	14
	Sycamore	12	Pennsylvania	Philadelphia	12
Indiana	Monticello	15	Texas	Houston	20
Kentucky	Mayfield	20	Washington	Seattle	50

More than half (54%) of the jurisdictions reported that they currently keep records on identified, unclaimed decedents. As can be seen in Figure 3, more than two in three (69%) of those who keep records, keep them indefinitely. One in 20 (6%) keep these records 11 or more years (where the end year was specified), 12% keep the records from 6 to 10 years, and 8% keep them 5 years or less.

FIGURE 3

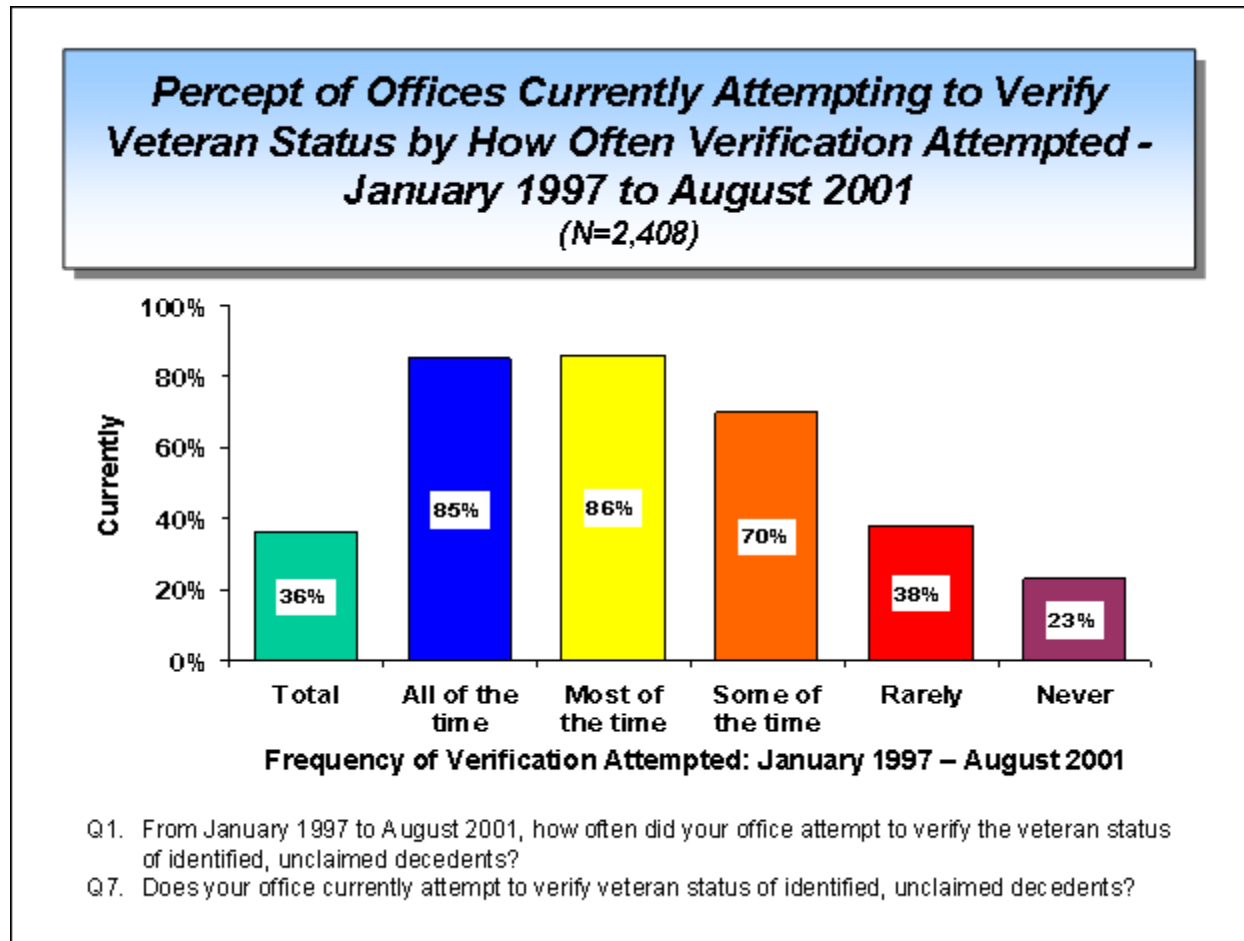
***Length of Time Records on Identified,
Unclaimed Decedents Kept***
(Among those that keep records, N=1,299)



Q6. How long do you keep records on identified, unclaimed decedents?

Currently, less than two in five (36%) attempt to verify the veteran status of all identified, unclaimed decedents. It is possible to compare the current practice with what took place between January 1997 and August 2001 (see Figure 1, page 10). This comparison is shown in Figure 4, below.

FIGURE 4



More than four in five (85%) ME/C offices which reported attempting to verify the veteran status of all identified, unclaimed decedents in the earlier period currently make such an attempt as well. This proportion remains constant for those who made such an attempt most of the time (86%) and drops to 70% currently for those who made such an attempt some of the time between January 1997 and August 2001. Among those who rarely or never made such an attempt previously, they are at least making some attempts currently, 38% and 23% respectively.

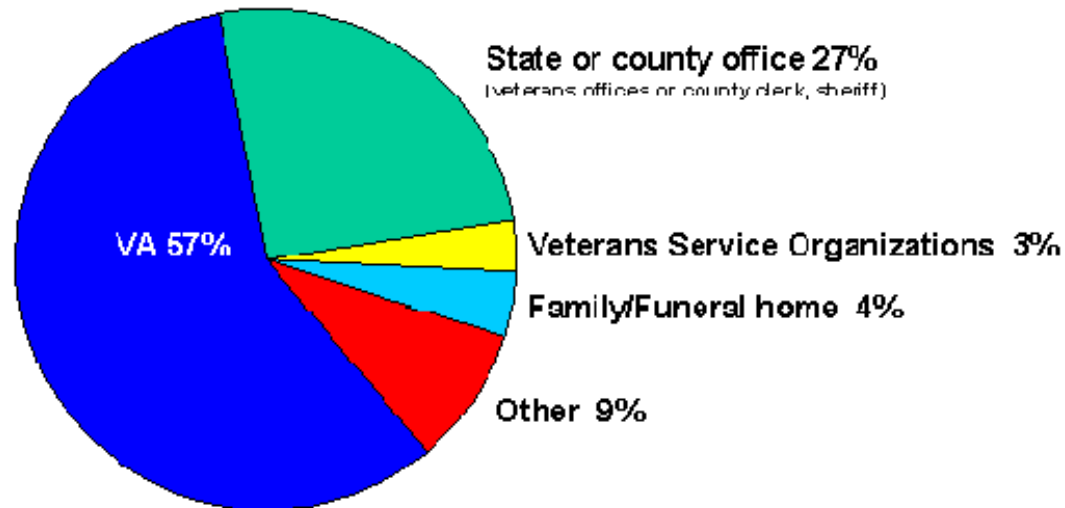
When this analysis is limited only to those jurisdictions which have had at least one identified, unclaimed decedent in the last 12 months, the proportion who currently attempt to verify veteran status in these cases increases to 60%.

The last series of questions asked jurisdictions if they currently attempt to verify the veteran status of identified, unclaimed decedents. Slightly more than one in three (36%) reported that they currently do attempt to verify veteran status. Those who do make an

attempt were asked the name of the organization they contact.

FIGURE 5

**Organization Contacted to
Verify Veteran Status**
(Among those that attempt to verify veteran status, N=713)



Q.D. Who does your office usually contact to verify veteran status?

Less than three in five (57%) who attempt to verify the veteran status of identified, unclaimed decedents contact a VA office. Most mentions were VA in general (29%) with others specifying medical centers or clinics (11%), regional offices or benefits personnel (12%), or other VA areas such as cemeteries or VA police (5%). Over one in four (27%) mentioned state (4%) or county (21%) veterans offices, or other county offices such as the clerk or sheriff (2%).

Family or funeral homes were mentioned by 4% while Veterans Service Organizations, such as the American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars, were mentioned by 3%. Other mentions, including the Social Security Administration, military bases, National Personnel Records Center, local hospitals, county offices or social services, etc., were mentioned by 9% of those who verify veteran status.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made with the understanding that while it is important to make sure that every veteran is treated with the respect they have earned in the service of our country, currently there is no legislative mandate requiring ME/Cs to verify veteran status for each identified, unclaimed decedent. Nonetheless, VA must rely on the various medical examiners and coroners to initiate a request. Further, given the Federal fiscal realities in which we live, some of these recommendations may be beyond current resources. Nonetheless, we have attempted to make this list as extensive as possible.

- The jurisdictions listed in Tables 6 and 7 of this report either have a large number of identified but unclaimed decedents or a large number of decedents for whom veteran status was confirmed. These jurisdictions could be contacted periodically throughout the year with information on the importance of identifying veterans, the services that can be provided by VA to determine veteran status, the procedure to go through, and the name and phone number of the local VA office to contact. Information on other related functions of the Department could also be sent that, while not directly related to their work, would be of interest to them. The goal is to reinforce the fact that VA can be of service.
- Augment the list developed above by the largest counties not represented. The assumption here is that large counties will have large numbers of both identified and unidentified unclaimed decedents.
- Send at least one informational mailing to all medical examiners and coroners throughout the nation.
- Prepare presentations and displays appropriate for the various organizations whose members are responsible for the disposal of unclaimed decedents. These organizations would include national and state level medical examiners, coroners, sheriffs, funeral directors, etc.
- Prepare articles for the publications of the organizations mentioned above covering the same information.
- Prepare a series of talking points that can be inserted into presentations of senior VA, national and local officials, as appropriate.

- Keep track of the number of requests to verify the veterans status of decedents which can be reported in VA publications and reports to the Congress. If sufficiently large, the data can be reported by state and/or county. This information would show the Congress that many ME/Cs around the country do contact VA on a regular basis to verify the veteran status of decedents. This item shows how all of the outreach translates into increased information about this service among ME/Cs.
- VA regional offices should keep track of changes in medical examiners, coroners, justices of the peace and sheriffs in their service areas. As elections or appointments take place where new individuals assume these offices, VA should send a note of congratulations together with information detailing the service which can be provided by VA in this area.
- Develop a protocol with the FBI and/or other organizations for the identification of **all** unclaimed decedents through the use of fingerprints. Once identified, the possibility to determine the veteran status of a decedent could take place.

Finally, a second survey gathering information on the awareness of, use of, and satisfaction with VA programs to assist local jurisdictions with the determination of veteran status should be conducted in 3 to 5 years. This will give sufficient time for any new program to take hold. As part of the preparation for the survey, a series of focus group sessions, cognitive interviews, and other methodological techniques should be held in conjunction with appropriate organizational meetings to make sure that the questionnaire is completely understood by potential respondents. Given the fact that the majority of the counties are small and rarely have an identified, unclaimed decedent, the use of sampling can substantially reduce the cost of any future survey.