



**Department of Veterans Affairs
Office of the Executive Secretary**

**Council of Federal Executive Secretariats
April 6, 2004
Best Practices Showcase**

Process for handling an incoming letter that will have an outgoing response signed by the Secretary.

Writing Pilot

- In November 2002, the Executive Secretariat initiated a writing pilot program to determine whether a more "corporate" approach, i.e., having few staff involved at the writing, editing, reviewing levels, would benefit the Secretary and the Department.
- Often, despite the involvement of staff at many levels within the Department, there was much staff work that remained to be completed by the Executive Secretariat when documents arrived, ostensibly ready for the Secretary's action.
- The pilot began with a focus on high-level Congressional correspondence and "warm-fuzzies," such as congratulatory, greeting or condolence letters.
- As the process currently works, the executive writer takes full responsibility for collaborating with the appropriate VA office(s) to gather the technical information for the response.
- The executive writer prepares the response, obtains all necessary concurrences, and presents the document at mail review for the Office of the Secretary (conducted by the Chief of Staff).
- The writing pilot has reduced processing time by 50 percent, and reduced the cost of preparing correspondence and other documents for which the Secretary is the signatory.

New Triage Process

- On February 2, 2004, VA's Executive Secretariat began a new process for triaging incoming documents.
- Executive Secretariat Reviewers determine whether the response will be prepared within the Executive Secretariat or controlled to the appropriate office(s).
- The Reviewers provide guidance for preparing the response as well as determine the concurrences that will be necessary.
- Administrations and staff offices will be instructed to review these comments prior to making their own internal assignments.
- This new procedure has added significantly to the workload and responsibilities of the Executive Secretariat staff, but has noticeably reduced the overall processing times.

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A RESPONSE **for Secretary or Deputy Secretary Signature** **(as of February 2004)**

You have been given an assignment to prepare a response for signature by the Secretary or the Deputy Secretary.

Due Date

All correspondence is tracked through the Central Office Electronic Document Management System (EDMS). Your organization's correspondence management office will assign a due date that provides sufficient time for the Departmental concurrence process.

When you receive your assignment, please be mindful that the Executive Secretariat is looking for a prompt, succinct, and readily understandable response. Please complete your assignment/work to allow sufficient time for internal reviews and concurrences by appropriate offices.

Getting Started

- Consult the VA Correspondence Guidelines located at vaww.execsec.va.gov
- Review the incoming correspondence carefully.
- Identify all asked and implied questions.
- Research similar or previous responses and any other relevant information.
- Organize response in a logical order ensuring the main message or VA's position (good or bad news) is stated up front.
- Avoid overuse of jargon and VA acronyms.
- Be forthcoming with information, but avoid a defensive or negative tone.
- Use active voice.

Consider the following

- How would you react to receiving the response?
- Have you taken care to deliver unwelcome news in a compassionate way?
- Have you examined all the options and provided them to the writer?
- Have you provided a point of contact for additional information?
- Have you used a fact sheet to present technical or complex information?

Concurrence(s)

You must give any organization mentioned or impacted by the content of the response an opportunity to concur.

The Assistant Secretary for Congressional and Legislative Affairs must concur on all congressional correspondence except for constituent case work before submission to 001B.

When to use a fact sheet

- One-page responses are preferred.
- When complex or technical information is included in the response, use a fact sheet with a brief cover letter.

For further guidance, refer to the Correspondence Guidelines found on the Executive Secretary's Web site at vaww.execsec.va.gov.