U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Plain Writing Act Compliance Report
April 2015

I. **Senior Agency Officials for Plain Writing:**
   a. Bonnie Miranda, Executive Secretary, Office of the Secretary, Office of the Executive Secretariat
   b. Jennifer Jessup, Deputy Executive Secretary, Office of the Secretary, Office of the Executive Secretariat
   c. Rachel Eisinger-Baskin, Executive Writer and Team Leader, Office of the Secretary, Office of the Executive Secretariat
   d. Liz Tate, Chief, Executive Correspondence, National Cemetery Administration
   e. Katrice Pasteur, Director, Office of Executive Correspondence, Veterans Health Administration
   f. Alexa Jensen, Executive Reviewer, Veterans Benefits Administration

   The Department's Staff Offices also provide representatives who serve on VA's Plain Language Working Group. Participating Staff Offices include:
   - Office of Acquisition, Logistics, and Construction
   - Office of Information and Technology
   - Office of Policy and Planning
   - Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs
   - Office of Security and Preparedness
   - Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
   - Office of Human Resources and Administration
   - Center for Women Veterans

II. **Explain what specific types of agency communications you have released by making them available in a format that is consistent with the Plain Writing guidelines.**

   VA has issued several types of communications to the public in a format that is consistent with the Plain Writing Act. Examples include: eBenefits.gov electronic brochures explaining VA benefits (over 4.49 million users); easy-to-read webpages on the Affordable Care Act; eligibility letters to VA beneficiaries regarding health care enrollment and the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014; claims development letters to VA applicants clarifying what is needed to process their claims; all VA forms; VA blogs; and other information posted on social media.

III. **Inform agency staff of Plain Writing Act's requirements:**
   a. Information on the Act is posted on the Department's external websites and available at the following links: http://www.va.gov/, http://www.va.gov/open/, and http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp.

b. The Act's requirements were briefed to Office of the Secretary (OSVA) leadership during the OSVA Special Programs Meeting hosted by the VA Deputy Chief of Staff. Plain language requirements and updates were a topic of discussion at 2013 and 2014 leadership meetings. VA's new Veteran Experience Office, just established under the MyVA initiative, was briefed in February 2015.

c. The Plain Language Working group continues to meet quarterly to discuss the group's tasks under the Charter, new membership, training, and additional ideas for increasing the Department's knowledge.

d. The Plain Language Working group briefed VA's Web Governance Board about Plain Language in March 2015.

IV. Training

VA worked with the Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Health, and obtained a copy of their newly developed online training course. VA will use this course material as the basis for potential VA-wide mandatory training later this fiscal year after it is customized for VA use.

VA's Learning University developed a series classes to educate Department employees who write policies, reports, memos, briefs, and other business documents. These modules assist with teaching employees how to apply plain language techniques and requirements.

The following courses are available in VA's Talent Management System and 209 VA employees completed these courses since April 2014.

- **Prerequisite eLearning Module: Formal Writing Using Plain Language – 2 hours:** A Web-based training that presents a practical approach to understanding Plain Language.
- **Module 1 - Addressing Data Calls – 4 hours:** Learn how to address data calls with accuracy, diplomacy and professionalism.
- **Module 2 - Drafting Memorandums – 4 hours:** Learn how to communicate effectively to internal audiences by drafting clear and concise memorandums that convey complex information, establish policy guidance or request action.
- **Module 3 - Writing Issue Briefs – 4 hours:** Learn how to summarize information on an issue or event and deliver clear and effective issue briefs to inform VA Leadership.
- **Module 4 - Responding to Congressional Inquiries – 4 hours:** Learn how to tailor written communications for positive impact and provide succinct, diplomatic responses to congressional inquiries.
- **Module 5 - Evaluating Data & Summarizing Findings – 4 hours:** Learn how to present data for the greatest impact and accurately summarize findings for all audiences.

- **Module 6 - Writing for Procurement – 4 hours:** Learn how to write key procurement documents to procure goods and services, or receive internal funding.
- **Module 7 - Writing Strategic Plans – 4 hours:** Learn how to write strategic plans, including vision and mission statements, values, goals and SMART objectives.
- **Module 8 - Writing Grants – 4 hours:** Learn how to write clear, succinct and compelling grant responses.
- **Module 9 - Writing Business Cases – 4 hours:** Learn how to write accurate and convincing business cases for decision makers.
- **Module 10 - Writing Position Papers – 4 hours:** Learn how to write succinct and compelling position papers to generate awareness or support for an issue.
- **Document Testing – 3 hours:** Learn how to perform Plain Language compliance testing on documents.

V. Ongoing compliance/sustaining change

a. VA is undergoing a dynamic period of change and restructuring. On September 2, 2014, VA implemented a new initiative, MyVA, which will reorient VA around Veterans' needs and empower employees to assist them in delivering excellent customer service to improve the Veteran experience. This is the largest Department-wide transformation in VA's history and will be a product of ideas and insights shared by Veterans, employees, members of Congress, Veterans Service Organizations, and other stakeholders. With this new initiative, offices will be using Plain Language to assist in improving the following:

   1) the Veteran experience
   2) the employee experience so they can better serve Veterans
   3) internal support services
   4) the culture of continuous improvement, and
   5) strategic partnerships.

   VA is currently developing a *VA Style Guide,* which will provide guidance for creating information to be posted on VA's webpages and brochures. This *VA Style Guide* will also enable the team to conduct a comprehensive review of all existing website content and online materials to create a standardized/uniform look and feel.

b. VA continues to use Plain Language to write new and rewrite older regulations. The staff is currently rewriting and reorganizing all 280 of its regulations on disability compensation benefits. The goal is to make VA's regulations easier to understand and apply, which will help Veterans and their Survivors better understand their rights and also assist Veterans Service Organization representatives who advocate for them.

c. VA is currently reviewing products that will test documents for Plain Language compliance and ensure that these documents meet the requirements of the *VA Style Guide*. Once a testing tool is developed, it will be distributed to the Administrations and Staff Offices to use.

d. VA's Plain Language Working Group, consisting of representatives from the VA Administrations and Staff offices, meets quarterly to provide recommendations for implementing the Act, and disseminates information throughout the respective Administrations and Staff offices. The next two meetings are scheduled for April 2015 and August 2015.

e. On July 22, 2014, VA made writing in Plain Language Department policy http://www.va.gov/opa/docs/0001dir14.pdf.

VI. Agency's plain writing website
a. VA's Plain Language website: http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp

b. Contact Us page: http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp and VAPlainLanguage@va.gov

c. Link from VA's homepage: http://www.va.gov/

d. Link from VA's Open.gov page: http://www.va.gov/open/

e. Links to Compliance reports: http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp 2013 and 2014 reports are available.

f. Links to OMB and PLAIN: http://www.va.gov/opa/Plain_Language.asp

VI. Customer Satisfaction Evaluation after Experiencing Plain Writing Communications

Through the MyVA initiative, VA will receive continuous feedback from its future community advocacy groups to ensure that VA is providing communications that are meaningful to all diverse Veterans groups throughout the country. In addition, the VA Plain Language Working Group will continue to engage employees to ensure that it is providing the best Plain Language writing tools.