



THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' SERVICES
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CHERYL LUSSIER POPPE
Secretary, DVS

To: All Veterans Service Officers and all Department of Veterans Services Staff

From: Secretary Cheryl Lussier Poppe, Department of Veterans Services

Re: Lifting of Certain Pandemic Protocols

Date: July 30, 2021

On March 10, 2020, Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker declared a state of emergency within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the declared state of emergency and the threat of COVID-19, the Department of Veteran Services (DVS) took steps to ensure Veterans in the Commonwealth continued to receive benefits under Chapter 115 during this particularly trying time. DVS worked with local Veteran Service Officers to safely process and deliver benefits and in spite of the threat of COVID-19, we were able to successfully ensure that Veterans received their benefits.

On June 15, 2021, Governor Baker declared an end to the to the state of emergency and many offices, including DVS and the local Veteran Service Officers through the Commonwealth, began to transition back to working out of their offices and returning to pre-pandemic business operations. DVS wants to ensure that we safely transition back to normal operations, but there are some lessons learned about how we can effectively utilize technology to make for a more efficient experience for our staff and the Veterans we serve. Below are the changes made to the Chapter 115 program during the pandemic and updates on how we will transition back to normal operations. Please note, any changes will take effect on September 1, 2021 in order to ensure Veterans and Service Officers (VSO) have adequate time to prepare.

- Starting on March 20, 2020, DVS implemented a 60-day authorization extension on all current and pending cases. DVS extended this extension through September 1, 2020. This extension ensured pending paperwork could be sent in through mail rather than dropped off at the local VSO offices. ***This effort was successful and no further extensions are***

needed.

- VSOs will approve qualifying applications without first obtaining DVS preapproval. ***DVS will continue to allow VSOs to approve qualifying applications without first obtaining DVS preapproval. DVS stands ready to assist VSOs with any questions regarding applications and VSOs may submit applications to DVS first if they choose.***
- VSOs will exercise liberal judgment when evaluating an application and have been instructed to draw reasonable conclusions in favor of the applicant. ***VSOs may continue to use their discretion in evaluating applications. DVS authorizers remain willing to assist VSOs with questions regarding the eligibility of Veterans for Chapter 115 benefits.***
- Applicants are only required to provide minimum proof of eligibility for benefits, which includes a service discharge document (DD214) and any of the following documents that proves residency:
 - o Mortgage statement or rental contract
 - o Utility bill
 - o Massachusetts Driver's License or Massachusetts ID
 - o Bank statement
 - o Letter of residency from a shelter or transitional home
 - o Current voter registration
 - o Notarized "Letter of Residency"
 - o US Postal contract agreement***Beginning on September 1, 2021, Veterans will be required to work with their VSOs on submitting proper documentation for applications. VSOs are back to working in their offices and available to assist Veterans with their applications.***
- The requirement for unemployed applicants to actively be seeking employment has been suspended for the duration of the public health crisis. ***Beginning on September 1, 2021, Veterans will be required to work with their VSOs on employment plans pursuant to 108 CMR 7.01 . Virtual and online applications are strongly encouraged.***
- The requirement to submit proper burial documentation for a veteran within 60 days of passing has been extended to 180 days, until further notice. ***DVS will keep this requirement to 180 days rather than reverting to 60 days. This will give Veterans' families additional time to submit documentation after suffering losses to their families.***
- Applicants can appeal a Notice of Action via email or by mailing back the form after writing the following on the Notice of Action: "I wish to appeal to DVS". ***We will allow Veterans who are appealing a Notice of Action to continue appealing in this fashion by either email or mailing a simple desire to appeal.***
- Until further notice, all DVS appeal hearings will be held telephonically. ***Prior to the pandemic, we allowed telephonic hearings for the convenience of the Veterans and VSOs. We will continue with telephonic hearings, however, as of 1 September, if a Veteran wishes to present their case in person, they may request an in-person hearing.***
- Applications shall not require signature. ***DVS will allow digital signatures on applications.***

If you have any questions about this guidance, please feel free to contact our General Counsel, Matthew Deacon at matthew.deacon@mass.gov. Thank you for all the hard work you do helping our Veterans during these challenging times.

Cheryl Lussier Poppe

Cheryl Lussier Poppe
Secretary
Department of Veterans' Services