

Chapter 2. Pre-Grant Approval: Initial Interview

Overview

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1. General Information About the Initial Interview

- Change Date** November 10, 2016, Change 2
- Subsections a, b, and c have been updated to clarify certain terms, define “recently adapted,” and clarify the timeliness standard associated with the initial interview.
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- a. Description** The initial interview is typically a face-to-face meeting between the Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) Agent and the Veteran that:
- establishes the relationship between the Veteran and SAH Agent;
 - allows an assessment of the Veteran’s:
 - exterior surroundings,
 - interior living conditions,
 - interactions between family members/caregivers,
 - overall physical condition and maneuverability, and/or
 - ability and willingness to communicate and make decisions;
 - provides an opportunity to discuss the benefits of the program, while answering any questions and concerns the Veteran may have; and
 - enables the SAH Agent and Veteran to begin the planning process.

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1. General Information About the Initial Interview, Continued

b. When to Initiate

The two components that define eligibility establishment are:

- a rating decision granting entitlement; and
- a properly completed and signed (depending on method of submission) [VA Form 26-4555](#), *Application in Acquiring Specially Adapted Housing or Special Home Adaptations*.

Within 7-business days of eligibility being established, the SAH Agent must notify the Veteran of eligibility in writing using either the *FL 26-39* (the SAH eligibility letter) or the *FL 26-39b* (the Special Home Adaptation (SHA) eligibility letter). The SAH Agent should then contact the Veteran as soon as possible to establish a mutually agreeable time to complete the initial interview. Please refer to paragraph d below for a discussion of the initial interview timeliness requirement.

Note: If possible, the SAH Agent should complete the initial interview and property suitability inspection concurrently. Property suitability is discussed in Chapter 3 of this manual.

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1. General Information About the Initial Interview, Continued

c. Telephone Interview

In most cases, the initial interview takes place in person. However, extenuating circumstances require flexibility and a telephone interview is acceptable for cases in which:

- the Veteran does not own a home; or
- the Veteran's location is so distant that overnight travel is required; or
- the Veteran is hospitalized, or lives in an assisted-living facility, nursing home, or rehabilitation center; or
- the Veteran is eligible for the SHA grant; or
- the Veteran is pursuing a subsequent use grant on a property recently adapted with SAH grant funds. Properties in which construction was completed within the previous 24 months are considered to be recently adapted.

The SAH Agent must document the reason a telephone interview was completed (in system notes), and it must be noted on the system-generated initial interview checklist. Neglecting to contact the Veteran until late in the 30-business day timeframe is not an acceptable reason to perform a telephone interview.

If a telephone interview was completed, and the Veteran indicates he/she is interested in adapting his/her property, a property suitability inspection, if required, must be completed within 30-business days of the telephone interview. If extreme weather or other significant extenuating circumstances exist that would prevent the 30-business day requirement from being met, the SAH Agent must clearly document the circumstances in the system.

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1. General Information About the Initial Interview, Continued

d. Timeliness Requirement

The initial interview must be completed within 30-business days of eligibility establishment, as defined above. To be considered timely, the completion date for the initial interview must be recorded on the appropriate system page before 30-business days have elapsed. If it is not possible to complete the initial interview within the specified timeframe because the Veteran is not available, or contact with the Veteran could not be established, the case notes in the system must be clearly documented indicating:

- the reason for the delay;
- at least two attempts to reach the Veteran by telephone;
- at least one attempt to reach the Veteran by notification letter in which the SAH Agent's contact information is provided; and
- an attempt to retrieve more current contact information from SHARE, Virtual VA, VBMS, and/or a Veteran Service Organization (VSO).

Note: Excessive agent workload is not an acceptable reason for a delay in completing the initial interview. Telephone interviews are not to be utilized to meet the timeliness requirement.

2. Preparation for the Initial Interview

Change Date February 12, 2014, Change 1

- This entire section has been updated.

a. Purpose Preparation for the initial interview is needed to obtain information about the Veteran prior to the interview, including, but not limited to:

- the Veteran's disability(ies);
 - the location of the interview;
 - whether the Veteran is confined to a nursing home or hospital;
 - where the Veteran resides;
 - the Veteran's level of competency and whether the Veteran has granted a power of attorney (POA).
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b. How to Prepare The following steps should be used as guidelines in preparing for the initial interview:

- Using available information, become as familiar as possible with the Veteran, including condition, disabilities, competency, living arrangements, use of medications, limitations, general mental health (including propensity for violent behavior), or use of drugs and/or alcohol.
 - Coordinate travel arrangements through the Regional Loan Center (RLC).
 - Obtain the necessary VA forms and pamphlets to take to the interview as listed by the initial interview checklist.
 - Be familiar with the initial interview checklist and the information that will be discussed with the Veteran.
 - Be prepared to complete a feasibility study if the Veteran intends to adapt his/her current home.
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3. Completing the Initial Interview

Change Date November 10, 2016, Change 2

- This section was updated to make minor grammatical edits.

a. Assessments Assessments are based on observations of the Veteran's:

- physical abilities,
- behavior and interactions,
- preferences, and
- ability to manage personal finances.

A thorough assessment of the Veteran's abilities helps the SAH Agent to:

- identify the adaptations that are needed, or desired, in the home for the Veteran's particular condition; and
 - determine whether the Veteran is capable of comprehending the information about the grant program and completing the grant requirements.
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b. Discussions Discussions with the Veteran take place to make sure the Veteran fully understands:

- the grant program,
 - his or her responsibilities,
 - his or her specific needs in regard to design and construction considerations, and
 - financial considerations.
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3. Completing the Initial Interview, Continued

c. Personal Representatives

If it is determined that the Veteran is unable to comprehend information or complete the grant requirements, such as signing documentation or making decisions, a personal representative must be present for the initial interview, and the representative should always be present when discussing the grant with the Veteran. Examples include:

- fiduciaries,
- POA,
- custodians,
- guardians,
- family members,
- friends, or
- neighbors.

Note: Any representative of the Veteran may sign the initial interview checklist to indicate that the information was conveyed. However, appropriate legal documentation is required in order for a representative to sign benefit applications, contracts, and other official grant documents. Please see Chapter 5, Topic 8, for more information about the POA.

d. Freedom of Choice

When discussing remodeling or construction with the Veteran, it is important to emphasize freedom of choice regarding the following areas:

- mortgage and construction financing,
- site selection,
- locality,
- builder selection,
- draftsman or architect,
- attorney, and
- escrow agent.

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3. Completing the Initial Interview, Continued

e. Reviewing the Grant Programs and Benefits

Inform the Veteran about the grant programs and other benefits, including:

- general information about the grant program and purpose,
 - feasibility and suitability requirements,
 - maximum grant amount,
 - number of uses,
 - plan types,
 - Temporary Residence Adaptations (TRA) grant and amount,
 - conditional and final approval,
 - required documents,
 - Veterans Mortgage Life Insurance (VMLI),
 - Home Improvement and Structural Alterations (HISA) grant offered through the Prosthetics and Sensory Aids (P&SA) program, and
 - Independent Living Program offered through the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program.
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f. Explaining the Design and Construction Process

The design and construction/remodeling considerations for SAH/SHA are discussed to ensure the Veteran comprehends the information and is capable of handling the requirements, including:

- financial responsibilities,
 - site inspection and/or existing home inspection,
 - minimum property requirements (MPRs) and waiver process,
 - recommended adaptations (RAs),
 - construction bids, including the 3-bid requirement and waiver process,
 - cost considerations,
 - construction plans,
 - VA compliance inspections,
 - final field review, and
 - performance bonds, which are recommended, but not required.
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3. Completing the Initial Interview, Continued

**g. Discussing
the Financial
Considerations**

The financial considerations associated with SAH/SHA are discussed to ensure the Veteran comprehends the information and is capable of handling the requirements, including:

- financial feasibility, including the need for certain financial information such as the mortgage payment, taxes, special assessments, insurance, heat and utilities, and miscellaneous repairs;
- evidence of title/ownership;
- proof of cost of Veteran's current home (if necessary) and other documents required to support the grant plan calculation;
- available funds for construction costs that exceed the grant amount;
- additional costs for items such as:
 - plans;
 - surveys;
 - title reports;
 - escrow fees; and
 - legal fees;
- homeowners insurance and potential increases; and
- possible local and state tax relief.

**h. Discussing
Escrow and
Release of
Funds**

The escrow and release of funds related to SAH/SHA are discussed to ensure the Veteran comprehends the information and is capable of handling the requirements, including:

- purpose of escrow,
 - selection of an escrow Agent,
 - escrow agreement,
 - management and authorization to release funds,
 - potential escrow fees,
 - when escrow is not required, and
 - Veteran's legal rights and all parties' roles/responsibilities in terms of dispute resolution and payment.
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4. Documenting the Initial Interview and Follow-Up

Change Date

December 20, 2016, Change 3

- Subsection e has been updated to clarify annual contact timeliness expectations and SAH Agent requirements for updating case notes.
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a. Purpose

The purpose of documenting the initial interview and following up with the Veteran is to:

- ensure that all discussion topics were covered during the initial interview,
 - ascertain the Veteran's desire to move forward with the grant approval process,
 - assist the Veteran in determining the next step in the grant approval process, and
 - answer any questions the Veteran may have.
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b. Interview Checklist

The interview checklist must be used to document the items discussed during the initial interview. At the conclusion of the interview, this document must be signed by the Veteran (or his/her representative) and the SAH Agent. If a phone interview was completed, it must be notated on the interview checklist in place of the Veteran's signature and the SAH Agent must sign the document. The interview checklist must be uploaded into the system within 20-business days of the date the initial interview was completed. Veteran and/or SAH Agent signatures, as discussed above, must appear on the interview checklist regardless of the existence of a signature line.

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4. Documenting the Initial Interview and Follow-Up, Continued

c. Follow-Up

The SAH Agent must follow up with the Veteran within 30-business days of the initial interview to review items discussed during the interview, and ascertain the Veteran's desire to move forward with the grant approval process. The SAH Agent must continue to contact the Veteran every 30-business days up to the construction start date or until the case is made inactive. This follow-up can be completed by telephone, e-mail, or regular mail, as long as it is documented in the system (with notes and/or uploaded correspondence documents). A case note indicating that a voicemail was left on the Veteran's answering machine does not meet the contact requirement.

d. Veteran Inactivity

In some cases, the Veteran may indicate that he/she is not interested in moving forward with the grant approval process, the Veteran may be in the hospital recovering from injuries, or the Veteran may become non-responsive after the initial interview.

If the Veteran decides not to move forward with the grant approval process, the case may be placed on inactive status only after the case notes have been clearly documented, and one of the following has been uploaded:

- a written notification from the Veteran that he or she would like to be placed on inactive status (e-mail is acceptable), or
- a letter sent from the RLC to the Veteran that indicates that the Veteran will be placed on inactive status unless the he or she responds and objects.

If the Veteran becomes non-responsive after the initial interview, the SAH Agent may place the case on inactive status after three attempts to contact the Veteran at successive 30-business day intervals. The first 30-business day interval begins the day after the initial interview is completed. One attempt must be a mailed notification letter in which the SAH Agent's contact information is provided. The notification letter must be uploaded into the system.

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4. Documenting the Initial Interview and Follow-Up, Continued

e. Annual Contact with the Veteran

For cases on inactive status, annual contact with the Veteran is required. The SAH Agent must send the system-generated annual contact letter within 30 business days of the one-year anniversary date of the last recorded Veteran contact. The SAH Agent must also ensure that the annual contact letter is recorded in the system.

If the Veteran responds to the annual contact letter, the SAH Agent must immediately upload the response to the system and the following scenarios may apply:

- If the Veteran indicates that he/she wishes to discuss his/her benefit, the SAH Agent must contact the Veteran immediately and document the results of this contact in the case notes. The SAH Agent will make a determination if the case should remain on inactive status, or be made active based on the Veteran's desire, as documented in the case notes.
- If the Veteran indicates that he/she does not wish to be contacted at this time, the case will remain on inactive status.

Important: Prior to sending the annual letter, the SAH Agent must verify the Veteran's current mailing address using SHARE, Virtual VA, or VBMS. If, during address verification, the SAH Agent notices that a date of death has been recorded in SHARE or the system, an annual letter should not be sent and the SAH Agent should follow the appropriate death case processing policy provided in Chapter 12 of this manual.
