



BILLING CODE 8320-01

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

[Docket No. VA-2026-VACO-0001]

Recognition of Organizations and Individuals to Assist Veterans, Family Members, and Caregivers Navigating Programs and Services of Veterans Health Administration

AGENCY: Department of Veterans Affairs.

ACTION: Notice; request for comments and information.

SUMMARY: The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is requesting comments and information to assist VA in implementing the requirements of section 129 of the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act (Dole Act). Section 129 of the Dole Act requires VA to establish a process to recognize organizations and individuals to assist veterans, their family members, or their caregivers in navigating Veterans Health Administration (VHA) programs and services. We invite comments concerning the proposed process outlined herein for VA to recognize organizations and individuals, including how such organizations and individuals can certify to VA that no fee or compensation will be charged to any individual for services rendered in providing assistance.

DATES: Comments are due by **[INSERT DATE 30 DAYS AFTER DATE OF PUBLICATION IN THE FEDERAL REGISTER]**.

ADDRESSES: You may submit comments through *www.regulations.gov* under Docket VA-2026-VACO-0001. Instructions for accessing agency documents, submitting comments, and viewing the docket are available on *www.regulations.gov* under “FAQ.”

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Christine Eickhoff, National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships, Veterans Health Administration, (202) 461-5751 or VHA_Partnerships@va.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

I. Background

Section 129(a) of the Dole Act (Public Law 118-210) requires VA to establish a process through which VA may recognize organizations and individuals to assist veterans, their family members, or their caregivers (as defined in 38 U.S.C. 1720G(d)) in navigating VHA programs and services. Section 129(b) requires VA to solicit feedback and recommendations in the creation of this process from such organizations as VA may consider relevant. Section 129(c) prohibits VA from recognizing an organization or individual pursuant to this process unless the organization or individual has certified to VA that no fee or compensation of any nature will be charged to any individual for services rendered in providing assistance in navigating VHA programs and services pursuant to section 129(a) of the Dole Act.

Currently, there is no established process for VA to recognize organizations and individuals that assist veterans, their family members, or their caregivers in navigating VHA programs and services. Under 38 U.S.C. 5901-

5904, VA may recognize organizations and individuals for the purpose of preparing, presenting, and prosecuting veterans' benefits claims. Pursuant to these authorities, VA has established a robust accreditation, oversight, and fees program. Through this program, VA accredits Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) and their representatives (see 38 U.S.C. 5902 and 38 CFR 14.628 and 14.629(a)), as well as attorneys and claims agents in their individual capacity (38 U.S.C. 5904 and 38 CFR 14.629(b)), to ensure that VA claimants receive competent and qualified representation when pursuing their VA benefit claims. Additionally, VA may use special authorization to recognize individuals who certify that no fees will be charged to the claimant, allowing them to assist with a single claim without accreditation, and in rare circumstances, assist on multiple claims without accreditation. 38 CFR 14.630(a)-(b). Similar to the health care navigation services that will be provided by organizations and individuals recognized under section 129 of the Dole Act, the claims services provided by VA-accredited VSO representatives and specially authorized individuals are always free to the individuals using those services. However, recognition under section 129 of the Dole Act would be distinct from the recognition process and requirements of 38 U.S.C. 5901-5904. This notice requests information related specifically to section 129 of the Dole Act. Any comments not related to section 129 of the Dole Act will not be considered within the scope of this notice.

II. Consultation with Interested Parties

Section 129(b) of the Dole Act requires VA to solicit feedback and recommendations in the creation of the process from organizations that VA may

consider relevant. The proposed process outlined below was developed with feedback from initial listening sessions with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, the Independence Fund, the National Resource Directory, Operation Homefront, Paralyzed Veterans of America, the Red Cross Military Veteran Caregiver Network, and the Wounded Warrior Project. The feedback and recommendations obtained during these sessions provided a baseline for the draft implementation framework outlined below. Initial feedback from organizations included the types of offerings organizations provide and how they provide resources that assist veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors with navigating VHA programs and services. Through this request for comments and information, VA is soliciting additional feedback and recommendations from organizations and individuals to help inform VA's recognition process under section 129 of the Dole Act.

III. Assistance in Navigating VHA Programs and Services

VA notes that assistance in navigating programs and services in a health care context is not defined for purposes of section 129 of the Dole Act. However, VA believes there are common factors for what could constitute assistance in navigating in this area. Assistance in navigating VA health programs and services could include guidance offered to potential and existing beneficiaries such as overcoming barriers and facilitating timely, high-quality, patient-centered care.¹ Providing support in navigating a health care system could also include

¹ Freund, K.M., Battaglia, T.A., Calhoun, E., Dudley, D.J., Fiscella, K., Paskett, E., Raich, P.C., and Roetzheim, R.G. (2008), National Cancer Institute Patient Navigation Research Program. *Cancer*, 113: 3391-3399. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cncr.23960>

logistical and emotional support needed to engage in the services and resources the system provides.² Organizations and individuals who assist in navigating may serve as “brokers who help individuals or families confront complex systems” and “offer possible solutions to program access challenges because they coordinate services, increase knowledge via education, and even promote systems change efforts that reduce barriers to access and make service delivery more welcoming to targeted populations”.³ Similar feedback from listening sessions included “making it easy to understand what you are eligible to receive” and “navigating the system at large.” Additional feedback from organizations also identified “connecting beneficiaries to the services available,” “a warm hand-off to a specific program the veteran wants,” “education about resources,” “training to community partners about new VA programs,” and leveraging “the peer-to-peer connection” as activities that they would consider to be assistance with navigating VHA programs and services.

Assistance in navigating VHA programs and services could also encompass coordination of the type described in 38 U.S.C. 523(b), which requires VA to seek to achieve the effective coordination of the provision, under laws administered by VA, of benefits and services (and information about such benefits and services) with appropriate programs (and information about such programs) conducted by State and local governmental agencies and by private

² Id.

³ Manhattan Strategy Group, Di Biase, C., & Mochel, M. (2021). Navigators in Social Service Delivery Settings: A Review of the Literature with Relevance to Workforce Development Programs. In D. Martierrez, Senior Evaluation Specialist, *U.S. Department of Labor*. https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/publications/ETAOP_2021-37_NavigatorLitReview_20211203_508.pdf

entities at the State and local level. Such assistance could also encompass the services described in 38 U.S.C. 2034(a) and carried out through VA's Homeless Programs to assist certain veterans with navigating resources provided by the Federal government and State, local, and Tribal governments.

Expanding on the input provided by organizations in the listening sessions, VA believes that assistance in navigating VHA programs and services could include:

- Identifying and describing programs, services, and resources VHA provides.
- Understanding and navigating eligibility for different VHA benefits and services, including where to find eligibility information and how to apply for VHA benefits.
- Discussing the impact of utilizing VHA services on eligibility for other VA or community services or resources.
- Addressing questions about completing applications for and otherwise requesting VA health benefits, including benefits under the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers and the Program of General Caregiver Support Services.
- Providing VA points of contact for VA health benefits, questions, and support.

IV. Framework for Recognition and Certification

VA proposes to establish the following framework for recognition of and certification by organizations or individuals under section 129 of the Dole Act.

A. Application for Recognition

VA proposes to establish an online platform for organizations and individuals to submit a recognition application. VA plans to begin accepting applications in 2026 once necessary processes are in place and only after VA has reviewed and considered comments received in response to this Notice. Organizations and individuals interested in being recognized under section 129 of the Dole Act would submit their request through the online platform. Organizations or individuals seeking recognition by VA would have to provide information, as applicable, including:

- For organizations, a brief description of the organization's mission and purpose.
- What services or programs the organization or the individual offers to veterans, their families, or caregivers.
- How the organization or individual provides their services (for example, in-person, online).
- How the services offered assist veterans, their families, or their caregivers in navigating VHA programs and services.

B. VA Reviews the Application

Upon receipt of an application, VA would review the application to ensure that the organization or individual could meet the statutory requirements in section 129 of the Dole Act, specifically that: (1) the organization or individual will assist veterans, their families, or their caregivers in navigating VHA programs and services; and (2) the organization or individual will certify to VA that no fee or

compensation of any nature will be charged to any individual for services rendered in providing such assistance. To meet the first criterion, the organization or individual must demonstrate that their services directly assist veterans, their families, or their caregivers with navigating VHA programs and services. While there is no specific definition for “navigating [VHA] programs and services” for purposes of section 129 of the Dole Act, VA would consider activities like those discussed in the section III above to meet this criterion. VA would also consider the information provided by the organization or individual in response to the application for recognition as discussed in section IV.A above. To meet the second criterion, the organization or individual would need to provide a signed document upon agreeing to the terms, as further described in section IV.D below, certifying to VA that no cost, fee, or compensation of any nature will be charged to any individual for services rendered in navigating VHA programs and services.

C. VA Notifies Organization or Individual of Decision

Following review, VA would notify, in writing, organizations and individuals of VA’s decision on whether VA could recognize the organization or individual. This would not constitute formal recognition, but it would inform the applicant of VA’s findings and preliminary conclusions and, if applicable, the next steps for recognition of the organization or individual. VA received feedback from the listening sessions that recommended using written notification to applicants. This notice would standardize communications between VA and those seeking recognition and help manage expectations and responsibilities. As applicable,

the written notification would specify, at minimum, the purpose of the recognition, responsibilities, expectations of the organization or individual, duration of the recognition under section 129 of the Dole Act, any limitations, the terms of renewal and termination, and VA contact information for the organization or individual recognized; the organization or individual would need to provide its contact information as well. The notification would include the appeal rights for organizations and individuals, including those who have not been selected for recognition. The notification would also explain, as applicable, that VA reserves the right to propose modifications to or terminate the recognition under section 129 of the Dole Act if the organization or individual fails to comply with the terms or fails to meet the recognition criteria. As applicable, the notification would include a document setting forth the terms and conditions of recognition with a signature line for the organization or individual.

D. Organization or Individual Agrees to Terms

Upon receipt of the written notification, the organization or individual would have to sign this document agreeing to the terms and conditions associated with recognition in order to be recognized. To ensure agreement with these requirements at the outset, organizations or individuals would have to:

- Certify that the organization or individual provides their services directly for no fee or compensation of any nature from the individual(s) assisted.
- Certify that the organization or individual is responsible for ensuring that any contractors, sub-contractors, or third parties do not charge a fee, cost,

or compensation to individuals for services rendered in providing assistance under section 129 of the Dole Act.

- Affirm that the organization or individual recognized offers two-way real time interactive communication with a person to assist veterans, their families, or their caregivers with navigating VHA services and programs.
- Affirm that the organization or individual does not have a history of controversies, unethical or illegal business or financial practices, leadership issues, or other negative optics that, if the organization or individual were recognized under section 129 of the Dole Act, would put veterans, VA staff, or the Department at increased legal, safety, or ethical risk. “Negative optics” would refer to any ongoing or previous activity that includes controversy, legal judgments, scams, alleged illegal or unethical activities, conflicts of interest, or lawsuits. VA would determine compliance with these requirements consistent with how VA makes such determinations for public-private partnerships in accordance with existing VA policy (specifically, VA Directive 0008, Developing Non-Monetary Public-Private Partnerships with, and Accepting Gifts to VA from Non-Governmental Organizations, available online at: <https://www.my.sites.va.gov/policy/>).
- Affirm that the organization has been registered as a legally operating entity with at least one State for at minimum 24 months (note, this requirement would not apply to individuals). To be registered as a legally operating entity, the organization must have a certificate of incorporation

or similar legal document from a State government office (for example, Secretary of State Business Services). This is typically the State where the organization files for taxes. The minimum 24-months' time frame ensures the relevant filing systems reflect currently operating organizations. For purposes of this notice, State means each of the several States, Territories, and possessions of the United States, the District of Columbia, and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

- Affirm that the organization has an active listing on the National Resource Directory led by the Department of Defense (note, this requirement would not apply to individuals).
- Affirm that the information available about the organization supports the details they provided in their recognition request (note, this requirement would not apply to individuals). VA would determine compliance with these requirements consistent with how VA makes such determinations for public-private partnerships in accordance with existing VA policy (specifically, VA Directive 0008, Developing Non-Monetary Public-Private Partnerships with, and Accepting Gifts to VA from, Non-Governmental Organizations).

By signing the document, the organization or individual would agree to these terms and conditions, and the organization or individual would certify that no fee or compensation of any nature will be charged to any individual for services rendered by the organization or individual in providing assistance with

navigating VHA programs and services. This document would have to be returned to VA before VA can publicly recognize the organization or individual.

E. VA Publicly Recognizes the Organization or Individual

Upon receipt of the signed document, and verification that applicable requirements have been met, VA would issue a notice in writing to the organization or individual that recognizes the organization or individual for purposes of section 129 of the Dole Act and sets forth applicable training requirements for the organization or individual. VA would maintain a list of recognized organizations and individuals on a public-facing website on the va.gov domain so that veterans, their families, their caregivers, and VA staff may easily identify those organizations and individuals that have been recognized as a resource to assist with navigating VHA programs and services.

V. Request for Comments and Information

This request for comments and information will assist VA in formalizing the process for recognition of organizations and individuals to assist veterans, their families, or their caregivers in navigating VHA programs and services. Comments not related to the process for recognition required under section 129 of the Dole Act, such as comments on specific VHA programs and services, health care delivery, VSO accreditation, contracts, acquisition, grants, or other types of monetary relationships, are not within the scope of this request for comments and information. VA notes that feedback received is intended to inform the process, and not all feedback will necessarily be incorporated in the process. Comments received that are applicable to the recognition process will be

considered by VA. Currently, VA plans to implement section 129 of the Dole Act without rulemaking. However, if VA decides to promulgate regulations under section 129, comments received in response to this request could inform future rulemaking.

Commenters are encouraged to provide complete, but concise, responses to the questions outlined below. Commenters do not need to address every question below and are encouraged to focus on those that relate to their expertise or perspectives. In addition to the questions below, VA may accept input on topics related to each question, as applicable. Please ensure to clearly indicate which topics and issues you address in your response. VA requests feedback and recommendations on the following topics.

A. Recognition Eligibility and Criteria

1. What qualifications should organizations or individuals possess to be eligible for recognition under section 129 of the Dole Act? Please provide justification and any recommendations for or against a qualification for an organization or individual that may seek recognition.

2. What feedback do you have on the proposed steps for VA receiving recognition requests and recognizing an individual or organization as outlined in section IV “Framework for Recognition and Certification?”

3. Are there any criteria for recognition identified in section IV “Framework for Recognition and Certification” of this notice that should be modified? Please provide clear justification and any recommendations for any proposed

modifications to criteria listed above and include language for any proposed revision.

4. What are examples of publicly available vetting tools (e.g., background checks, websites, directories, organizational profiles, etc.) that should be leveraged to assist in validating the eligibility of organizations or individuals?

5. VA is planning to recognize organizations and individuals for an initial one-year timeframe, and to allow for annual renewal for up to three total years, provided the organization or individual continues to meet the recognition criteria. After the maximum recognition timeframe, an organization or individual would need to complete a new recognition application to renew their recognition, and the process outlined above would repeat. This would help ensure their information is current and the organization or individual still meets the requirements of section 129 of the Dole Act. Please provide a justification for any feedback you may have on these proposed timeframes.

6. What are examples of supporting documents or evidence organizations or individuals should provide as part of their recognition request to help demonstrate how they meet section 129 of the Dole Act and the proposed criteria for recognition?

B. Assistance in Navigating VHA Programs and Services

1. What are examples of documents an organization or individual should provide as evidence to detail each specific type of assistance or support they provide to veterans, their family members, or their caregivers in navigating VHA programs and services?

2. What are examples of assistance veterans, their families, or their caregivers may need in navigating VHA programs and services?

3. What are examples of assistance that organizations or individuals may provide in navigating VHA programs and services?

4. What activities or training should an organization or individual engage in to ensure they have the critical skills and expertise to assist with navigating VHA programs and services?

C. "No Fee or Compensation" Certification to VA

1. What are examples of documents, attestations, etc., an organization should provide to certify to VA that no fee or compensation of any nature will be charged to any individual for services rendered in providing assistance?

2. What are examples of documents, attestations, etc., an individual should provide to certify to VA that no fee or compensation of any nature will be charged for services rendered in providing assistance?

3. What are examples of publicly available tools, websites, directories, profiles, etc. that could be leveraged to assist in certifying that no fee or compensation of any nature will be charged for services rendered in providing assistance?

4. In the case that a recognized organization or individual charges a fee or requires compensation for services rendered in providing assistance in navigating VHA programs or services, VA would take action to revoke their recognition. Should any other consequences or penalties apply in these

circumstances (for example, with respect to future recognition of the organization or individual)?

5. Should organizations or individuals that offer both free and paid services other than those for navigating VHA programs and services be eligible for recognition under section 129 of the Dole Act, or should organizations or individuals that only provide free services be eligible? Please provide clear justification on your recommendation.

D. Oversight

1. What are examples of existing platforms that could be leveraged to allow veterans, their families, or caregivers to provide feedback to VA about recognized organizations and individuals and the assistance they provide in navigating VHA programs or services?

2. In the case that a recognized organization or individual does not provide the assistance they claimed to, or fails to meet the recognition criteria under section 129 of the Dole Act, VA would take action to revoke their recognition. Should any other consequences or penalties apply in these circumstances (for example, with respect to future recognition of the organization or individual)?

SIGNING AUTHORITY

Douglas A. Collins, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, approved this document on September 8, 2026 and authorized the undersigned to sign and submit the document to the Office of the Federal Register for publication electronically as an official document of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Jacquelyn Collins,

Alternate Federal Register Liaison Officer, Department of Veterans Affairs.

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