

§ 1.553a

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shall be processed under paragraph (b) of this section, as well as under any other VA law or regulation governing access to or confidentiality of records or information. Records or information customarily furnished to the public in the regular course of the performance of official duties may be furnished to the public without reference to paragraph (b) of this section. To the extent permitted by other laws and regulations, VA will also consider making available records which it is permitted to withhold under the FOIA if it determines that such disclosure could be in the public interest.

(b) Reasonably described records in VA custody, or copies thereof, other than records made available to the public under provisions of §§1.551 and 1.552 of this part, or unless otherwise provided for in title 38, Code of Federal Regulations, requested in accordance with published rules stating the time, place, fees (if any), and procedures to be followed, will be made promptly available, except as provided in §1.554 of this part, to any person upon request. Such request must be in writing, over the signature of the requester and must contain a reasonable description of the record desired so that it may be located with relative ease. The request should be made to the office concerned (having jurisdiction of the record desired) or, if not known, to the Director or Veterans Service Center Manager in the nearest VA regional office; the Director, or Chief, Medical Administration Service, or other responsible official of VA medical facility where most recently treated; or to the Department of Veterans Affairs Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue NW., Washington, DC 20420. Personal contacts should normally be made during the regular duty hours of the office concerned, which are 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday for VA Central Office and most field facilities.

(Authority: 5 U.S.C. 552(a)(3))

[53 FR 10377, Mar. 31, 1988, as amended at 71 FR 28586, May 17, 2006]

§ 1.553a Time limits for Department of Veterans Affairs response to requests for records.

(a) When a request for records made under §1.551, §1.552 or §1.553 is received

it will be promptly referred for action to the proper employee designated in accordance with §1.556 to take initial action on granting or denying requests to inspect or obtain information from or copies of the records described.

(b) Any such request will then be promptly evaluated and a determination made within 10 days (excepting Saturdays, Sundays, and legal public holidays) after the receipt of the request whether the Department of Veterans Affairs will comply with the request. Upon determination to comply or deny the request the person making the request will be notified immediately of the determination and the reasons therefor, and of the right of the person to appeal to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs any adverse determination. Records to be furnished will be supplied promptly.

(c) Upon receipt of such an appeal from an adverse determination it will be evaluated and a further determination made within 20 days (excepting Saturdays, Sundays, and legal public holidays) after receipt of the appeal. If on appeal the denial is in whole or in part upheld the Department of Veterans Affairs will notify the requester of the provisions for judicial review of this determination. (See §§1.557 and 1.558.)

(d) In unusual circumstances, specifically as follows, the time limits in paragraphs (b) and (c) of this section may be extended by written notice to the requester setting forth the reasons for such extension and the date on which a determination is expected to be dispatched. The date specified will not result in an extension for more than 10 working days. *Unusual circumstances* will be interpreted to mean, but only to the extent reasonably necessary to the proper processing of the particular request, as follows:

(1) The need to search for and collect the requested records from field facilities or other establishments that are separate from the office processing the request;

(2) The need to search for, collect, and appropriately examine a voluminous amount of separate and distinct records which are demanded in a single request; or

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(3) The need for consultation, which shall be conducted with all practicable speed, with another agency having a substantial interest in the determination of the request or among two or more components of the Department of Veterans Affairs having substantial subject-matter interest therein.

(e) Pursuant to section 552(a)(6), title 5 U.S.C., any person making a request to the Department of Veterans Affairs for records under section 552(a) (1), (2) or (3) (see §§ 1.551, 1.552 and 1.553) will be deemed to have exhausted his or her administrative remedies with respect to such request if the Department of Veterans Affairs fails to comply with the applicable time limit provisions of this section. If, however, the Government can show exceptional circumstances exist and that the Department of Veterans Affairs is exercising due diligence in responding to the request, the statute also permits the court to retain jurisdiction and allow the Department of Veterans Affairs additional time to complete its review of the records.

(f) Requests for the release of information from files, records, reports, and other papers and documents in Department of Veterans Affairs custody pertaining to claims under any of the laws administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (covered by §§ 1.500 through 1.527) may also be initiated under 5 U.S.C. 552. Such requests will also be evaluated, a determination made within 10 days (excepting Saturdays, Sundays, and legal public holidays) after the receipt of the request whether the Department of Veterans Affairs will comply with the request, and the requester notified immediately of the determination and the reasons therefor, and of the right of the person to appeal to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs any adverse determination. Records to be furnished will be supplied promptly.

[40 FR 12657, Mar. 20, 1975]

§ 1.554 Exemptions from public access to agency records.

(a) The exemptions in this paragraph constitute authority to withhold from disclosure certain categories of information in Department of Veterans Affairs records except that any reason-

ably segregable portion of a record shall be provided to any person requesting such record after deletion of the portions which are exempt under this paragraph.

(1) Specifically authorized under criteria established by an Executive order to be kept secret in the interest of the national defense or foreign policy, and are in fact properly classified pursuant to such Executive order.

(2) Related solely to internal Department of Veterans Affairs personnel rules and practices.

(3) Specifically exempted from disclosure by statute other than 5 U.S.C. 552b, provided that such statute:

(i) Requires that the matters be withheld from the public in such a manner as to leave no discretion on the issue, or

(ii) Establishes particular criteria for withholding or refers to particular types of matters to be withheld.

(4) Trade secrets and commercial or financial information obtained from any person and privileged or confidential.

(5) Interagency or intra-agency memorandums or letters which would not be available by law to a private party in litigation with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

(6) Personnel and medical files and similar files the disclosure of which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.

(7) Records or information compiled for law enforcement purposes, but only to the extent that the production of such law enforcement records or information:

(i) Could reasonably be expected to interfere with enforcement proceedings;

(ii) Would deprive a person of a right to a fair trial or an impartial adjudication;

(iii) Could reasonably be expected to constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy;

(iv) Could reasonably be expected to disclose the identity of a confidential source, including a State, local or foreign agency or authority or any private institution which furnished information on a confidential basis, and, in the case of a record or information