Privacy and HIPAA-focused Training

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Welcome to Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Privacy and HIPAA-focused Training. All VHA staff with access to patient/human research subject data are required to complete the training annually. All new employees with access to patient/human research subject data are required to take this training within 30 days of being hired.

**Course Overview**
In 1996, Congress passed the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). On December 28, 2000, the final rule for Standards for Privacy of Individually Identifiable Health Information, hence the HIPAA Privacy Rule, was published. Revisions have been published and the full implementation of the rule became effective April 14, 2003.

The Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act was signed into law on February 17, 2009 to promote the adoption and meaningful use of health information technology. Subtitle D of the HITECH Act addresses the privacy and security concerns associated with the electronic transmission of health information, in part, through several provisions that strengthen the civil and criminal enforcement of the HIPAA rules.

**Goal**
The goal of this course is to provide you with the requisite knowledge to be aware of VHA Privacy Policies, including those resulting from the HIPAA Privacy Rule and the HITECH Act.

**Course Objectives**
Upon completion of this training, you will be able to identify:
- The background and scope of applicable privacy and confidentiality statutes and regulations,
- Rights granted to Veterans by the Privacy Act and HIPAA Privacy Rule,
- Disclosure purposes that do not require authorization from the Veteran,
- Disclosure purposes that require authorization from the Veteran,
- Information that can be disclosed,
- Operational requirements relating to the release of information, and
- Elements of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

**How do I get help if I need it?**
If you are having trouble reading or understanding any of the information presented here, please ask for help from your supervisor or our facility Privacy Officer (PO).

The **Privacy Officer** for
Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center
can be reached at
414 384-2000 Extension 41095
In this lesson, you will learn about the background and scope of applicable privacy and confidentiality statutes and regulations. Specifically you will learn the following:

- Seven statutes that govern the collection, maintenance and release of information from Veterans Health Administration (VHA) records,
- Employee responsibility in the use and disclosure of information,
- Unauthorized Use, Access or Disclosure of Personally Identifiable or Protected Health Information, and
- Functional Categories and Minimum Necessary Standard.

**Basic Privacy Statutes**

VHA health care facilities should comply with all statutes simultaneously so that the result will be application of the most stringent provision for all uses and/or disclosures of data and in the exercise of the greatest rights for the individual.

- The Privacy Act (PA), 5 U.S.C. 552a
- Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)
- Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act
- 38 U.S.C.§ 5701 Confidentiality Nature of Claims
- 38 U.S.C.§ 7332 Confidentiality of Certain Medical Records

**The Privacy Act (PA), 5 U.S.C. 552a:** "The Privacy Act of 1974 (PA)," makes records of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that are records about a living Individual who is a United States citizen or an alien lawfully admitted to US residence confidential.

**Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and its implementing regulation the HIPAA Privacy Rule:** The HIPAA Privacy Rule provides federal protections for personal health information held by covered entities and gives patients an array of rights with respect to that information. At the same time, the Privacy Rule is balanced so that it permits the disclosure of personal health information needed for patient care and other important purposes.

**Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act:** The Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act addresses the privacy and security concerns associated with the electronic transmission of health information.

**38 U.S.C. 5701 Confidentiality Nature of Claims:** 38 U.S.C. Section 5701 makes VA benefits records and the names and home addresses of present and former armed forces personnel and their dependents confidential.

38 U.S.C.§ 7332 Confidentiality of Certain Medical Records: 38 U.S.C. Section 7332 makes strictly confidential all VA records that contain the identity, diagnosis, prognosis or treatment of VA patients or subjects for drug abuse, alcoholism or alcohol abuse, infection with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV/AIDS), or Sickle Cell Anemia.

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. 552: The FOIA requires Federal departments and agencies, such as VA, to release their records unless FOIA specifically exempts the information or record from disclosure.

Employee Responsibility in the Use and Disclosure of Information

- VHA employees must comply with all Federal laws and regulations, VA regulations and policies, and VHA policies regarding the confidentiality and privacy of Veteran and employee records. In addition, all VHA employees must conduct themselves in accordance with the rules of ethical conduct.

  - Personally identifiable information (PII) and protected health information (PHI) on Veterans and employees should only be collected, accessed or viewed by VHA employees with a need for that information in the performance of their official VA duties. VHA employees should not access or view the PII/PHI of their coworkers or Veterans out of curiosity or for any purpose that is not related to official VA duties. Also, Supervisors may not view the health records of their employees who are Veterans to look at their clinic appointments or other health information for employment-related purposes.

  - VHA employees who collect, access or view PII/PHI on Veterans or employees for purposes other than those for official VA duties, including curiosity, are subject to disciplinary action. Even if the VHA employee had good intentions in accessing or viewing the Veteran or employee information, such as to look up a home address to send a sympathy card, it is a privacy breach and disciplinary action may result.

Unauthorized Use, Access or Disclosure of Personally Identifiable or Protected Health Information

The following are examples of unauthorized use that may result in appropriate disciplinary action:

- Accessing information outside the scope of your functional category.

- Checking a co-worker's health record upon their request with no business need to know.

- Checking family members' health records if there is no business need to know.

- Checking Veteran's or employee's health records out of curiosity.

- No longer permitted: Supervisors accessing their employee Veterans' health records under a "need to know."
The following are potential administrative actions that may be taken by the supervisor with guidance from Human Resources:

- Reprimand being placed in personnel file,
- Suspension from job,
- Demotion, or job loss,
- Civil or criminal prosecution, or
- Fines or imprisonment

**Functional Categories and Minimum Necessary Standard**

*VHA Handbook 1605.02 "Minimum Necessary Standard for Protected Health Information"* discusses the requirement for assignment of functional categories. The handbook states that VHA must identify the persons, or classes of persons, who need access to protected health information to carry out their duties, the categories of protected health information to which access is needed, and any conditions under which they need the information to do their jobs.

VHA personnel must be assigned a functional category by their supervisor upon initial hire, position change, and annually thereafter to review the applicability of access to protected health information to their official job duties.

VA form 10-0539, "Assignment of Functional Categories" is found in *VHA Handbook 1605.02 Appendix E* and can be used to assign functional categories. **Employees must sign and date the form annually.**

The form is not required to be used but if it is not used a documented process must be in place to ensure compliance. Refer to the facility Privacy Officer for additional guidance.
Lesson 2: Veterans’ Rights  

In this lesson you will learn about the rights granted to Veterans by the Privacy Act and the HIPAA Privacy Rule. When the Privacy Act and the HIPAA Privacy Rule are in conflict, the regulation that grants the Veteran the most rights is used.

Specifically, you will learn about the Veterans right to:

- A Notice of Privacy Practices (NoPP),
- A copy of their own Protected Health Information,
- Request an amendment to health records,
- Request an Accounting of Disclosures,
- Request and receive confidential communications,
- Request restriction of use or disclosure of records, and
- File a complaint

IMPORTANT: These rights extend to the personal representative of a deceased individual (e.g. Executor of the Estate, Next of Kin).

Employees must protect PHI about a deceased individual in the same manner and to the same extent as that of living individuals for as long as the records are maintained.

Notice of Privacy Practices (NoPP)

A Veteran or Non-Veteran receiving treatment has the right to receive a copy of the VHA Notice of Privacy Practices (NoPP). All newly registered Veterans are mailed a Notice of Privacy Practices by the Health Eligibility Center (HEC). The VHA Privacy Office is responsible for updating the NoPP and ensuring Veterans are provided the NoPP every three years or when there is a significant change.

This notice includes the uses and disclosures of his/her protected health information by VHA, as well as, the Veteran's rights and VHA's legal responsibilities with respect to protected health information. There is one NoPP for all of VHA.

A copy of the NoPP as well as answers to questions about the NoPP and information on Non-Veteran requirements for the NoPP can be obtained from the Privacy Officer or at the following website:


Right of Access

A Veteran has a right to obtain a copy of his or her own health record. A Veteran must submit a signed written request to the VHA health care facility where the record is maintained.

VHA employees should refer all requests from Veterans for copies of their records to the Release of Information (ROI) Office or to another appropriate office that has a mechanism in place to track those
disclosures. Clinical providers may disclose patient information at Point of Care, without a written request, if it is for patient education purposes. Veterans requesting copies of their health records must provide sufficient information to verify their identity, e.g., driver's license or other picture identification, to ensure appropriate disclosure.

**Right to Request an Amendment**
The Veteran has the right to request an amendment to any information in their health record. The request must be in writing and adequately describe the specific information the Veteran believes to be inaccurate, incomplete, irrelevant, or untimely, and the reason for this belief.

The **written request** should be mailed or delivered to the VHA health care facility that maintains the record. Requests for amendments to health records should be directed to the local Privacy Officer. Authors of the requested amendments should work with their Privacy Officers so that a timely response is given.

**Right to and Accounting of Disclosures**
A Veteran may request a list of all written disclosures of information, from his/her records. VHA facilities and program offices are required to keep an accurate accounting for each disclosure made to a party external to VHA. An accounting is **not** required to be maintained in certain circumstances, including when the disclosure is to VHA employees who have a need for the information in the performance of their official duties, if the release is to the individual to whom the record pertains or the release of information is pursuant to a FOIA request.

Entry of a VA patient by name or other identifier into a State Prescription Drug Monitoring program is considered a disclosure that must be accounted for. The employee making the disclosure must do the accounting of disclosures; this can be done through creating a note in CPRS or accounting for the disclosure manually. Work with our VHA facility Chief of HIMS for additional guidance.

Electronic batch reporting, handled by the IT system, will capture the information that can be used to generate the accounting of disclosures retrospectively when requested.

**Right to Confidential Communications**
The Veteran has the right to request and receive communications confidentially from VHA by an alternative means or at an alternative location. VHA considers an alternative means to be an in-person request, and an alternative location to be an address other than the individual's permanent address listed in Veterans Health Information Systems and Technology Architecture (VistA).

VHA shall accommodate reasonable requests from the individual to receive communications at an alternative address entered in VistA for any of the five correspondence types below:

- Eligibility or enrollment,
- Appointment or scheduling,
- Co-payments or Veteran billing,
• Health records, and
• All other

Requests to send documents or correspondence to multiple addresses will be considered unreasonable and therefore denied (all or none to one address).

Requests for confidential communications, in person or in writing, shall be referred to the appropriate office, such as eligibility or enrollment, for processing. All requests for confidential communication via e-mail will be denied.

**Right to Request a Restriction**
The Veteran has the right to request VHA to restrict its use or disclosure of PHI to carry out treatment, payment, or health care operations. The Veteran also has the right to request VHA to restrict the disclosure of PHI to the next of kin, family, or significant others involved in the individual's care. This request must be in writing and signed by the Veteran. Documenting in the CPRS health record does not constitute a valid restriction request.

**VHA is not required** to agree to such restrictions, but if it does, VHA must adhere to the restrictions to which it has agreed. A request for restriction should be delivered to the Privacy Officer or designee for processing.

**Right to Opt–Out of Facility Directory**
A Veteran has the right to opt-out of the facility directory. The facility directory is used to provide information on the location and general status of a Veteran. Veterans must be in an inpatient setting in order to opt-out and thus it does not apply to the emergency room or other outpatient settings. If the Veteran opts out of the facility directory no information will be given unless required by law. The Veteran will not receive mail or flowers. If the Veteran has opted out of the directory visitors will only be directed to the Veteran's room if they already know the room number.

If the Veteran is admitted emergently and medically cannot give their opt-out preference, the provider will use their professional judgment and make the determination for the Veteran. This determination may be based on previous admissions, or by a family member who is involved in the care of the Veteran. When the Veteran becomes able to make a decision, staff is required to ask the individual their preference about opting out of the facility directory.

**Right to File a Complaint**
Patients have a right to file a complaint if they believe that VHA has violated their (or someone else's) health information, privacy rights or committed another violation of the Privacy or Security Rule.

A complaint can be filed by contacting one or more of:
• The VHA health care facility's Privacy Officer, where they are receiving care,
• The VHA Privacy Office,
• Office of Inspector General, or
• The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Civil Rights
Lesson 3: Introduction to Uses and Disclosures of Information

In this lesson, you will learn about the use and disclosure purposes for release of PHI within VA that do not require a written authorization from the Veteran.

Specifically you will learn:

- Using or disclosing PHI for treatment, payment and/or health care operations (TPO),
- Disclosure of PHI without an authorization for other than TPO,
- Use of PHI for research purposes,
- Incidental Disclosures, and
- Systems of Records

Using PHI without an Authorization for Treatment, Payment, or Health Care Operations

VHA employees may use PHI on a need to know basis for their official job duties for purposes of treatment, payment and/or health care operations.

"Treatment" generally means the provision, coordination, or management of health care and related services among health care providers or by a health care provider with a third party, consultation between health care providers regarding a patient, or the referral of a patient from one health care provider to another.

"Payment" encompasses the various activities of health care providers to obtain payment or be reimbursed for their services and of a health plan to obtain premiums, to fulfill their coverage responsibilities and provide benefits under the plan, and to obtain or provide reimbursement for the provision of health care.

"Health care operations" are certain administrative, financial, legal, and quality improvement activities of a covered entity that are necessary to run its business and to support the core functions of treatment and payment.

Disclosure of PHI without an Authorization for Other than Treatment, Payment, or Health Care Operations

For the purpose of determining a Veteran's eligibility, entitlement, and/or provision of benefits, VHA may disclose Veteran PHI to the following groups:

- Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)
- National Cemetery Administration (NCA)
- Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA)
- VA contractors (as long as there is a business associate agreement in place)

There are also a number of situations where VHA may disclose information, without an authorization, for other than treatment, payment, or health care operations. Examples of some of these include:

- Public Health Activities (e.g., giving information about certain diseases to government agencies)
- When Required by Law
- Research Activities (e.g., giving information to a researcher to prepare a research protocol)
Abuse Reporting (e.g., giving information about suspected abuse of elders or children to government agencies)

Law Enforcement

State Prescription Drug Monitoring Program (SPDMP)

For additional information and guidance contact the Privacy Officer.

Use of PHI for Research Purposes

A VA researcher may access PHI without the subject's written authorization if the information is reviewed preparatory to research on human subjects. Only aggregate data will be recorded in the researcher's file and no PHI will be removed from VHA during the preparatory phase. At this facility, reviews preparatory to research are approved by the IRB.

Further use or disclosure of PHI requires IRB approval of the research protocol, informed consent, or waiver of informed consent. In addition, the Principal Investigator (PI) must have an approved HIPAA authorization that is reviewed by the Privacy Officer or a waiver of the HIPAA authorization by the IRB or Privacy Board. If the research involves pictures or voice recordings for other than treatment purposes, an additional VA Form 10-3203 Consent for Use of Picture and/or Voice is required if authorization is not specifically included as part of the research informed consent form.

Incidental Disclosures

Many customary health care communications and practices play an essential role in ensuring that Veterans receive prompt and effective health care. Due to the nature of these communications and practices, as well as the various environments in which Veterans receive health care or other services from VHA, the potential exists for a Veteran's health information to be disclosed incidentally. For example:

- A hospital visitor may overhear a provider's confidential conversation with another provider or a patient.
- A patient may see limited information on sign-in sheets.
- A Veteran may hear another Veteran's name being called out for an appointment.
- A Veteran may see limited information on bingo boards or white boards.

**NOTE:** Incidental disclosures are permitted as long as reasonable safeguards to protect the privacy of the information are followed.

Many health care facilities providers and professionals have long made it a practice to ensure reasonable safeguards are in place for Veterans PHI. For instance:

- Speaking quietly when discussing a patient's condition with family members in a waiting room or other public area;
- Avoiding using patients' names in public hallways and elevators, and posting signs to remind employees to protect patient confidentiality;
- Only using last four digits of SSN on bingo boards; and
• Reducing the use of the SSN whenever possible.

System of Records
A System of Records (SOR) is a group of records under the control of the agency from which information about an individual may be retrieved by the name of the individual or by some other unique identifier or symbol.

• An advance public notice known as the System of Records Notice (SORN) must be published prior to an agency collecting information for a new SOR.

• Publication in the Federal Register is required to provide an opportunity for the interested person to comment.

• One SOR that is familiar in VHA is 24VA10P2—Patient Medical Records—VA.

• Within the SOR, there is a section describing routine uses (RU), which is a term that is unique to the Privacy Act and means the disclosure of a record outside of VA for a reason compatible with the purpose for which it was collected.

• A "routine use" gives authority to allow for disclosure outside of VA without authorization.

• For additional information on System of Records, contact your administration or VHA health care facility Privacy Officer.

For a list of all VHA systems of records, go to
Lesson 4: Authorization Requirements and Privacy of Photographs, Digital Images and Video and Audio Recordings

In this lesson, you will learn the components for a valid authorization and information about the privacy of audio and video recordings.

Specifically, you will learn about:

- Authorization Requirements, and
- Privacy of photographs, digital images and video and audio recordings

**Definition of Authorization**

An authorization as defined by the HIPAA Privacy Rule is an individual's written permission for a covered entity to use and disclose protected health information (PHI). A written authorization is a document that describes the categories of HIPAA-defined information that may be disclosed.

**Authorization Requirements**

If VHA employees receive a request for PHI that is accompanied by a valid written authorization, disclosure should be made in accordance with the authorization. When a valid written request, signed by the individual is made, every attempt to provide the disclosure should be made.

When a written authorization of the individual is required for use or disclosure of PHI, the authorization must contain each of the following elements to be valid:

- Be in writing,
- Identify the individual to whom the requested information pertains to,
- Identify the permitted recipient or user,
- Describe the information requested,
- Describe the purpose of the requested use or disclosure,
- Contain the signature of the individual whose records will be used or disclosed,
- Contain an expiration date, satisfaction of a need or an event,
- Include a statement that the patient may revoke the authorization in writing, except to the extent the facility has already acted in reliance on it, and a description of how the individual may revoke the authorization,
- Include a statement that treatment, payment, enrollment, or eligibility for benefits cannot be conditioned on the individual completing an authorization, and
- Include a statement that the information may no longer be protected from re-disclosure.
If any of the authorization requirements listed above have not been satisfied the authorization will be considered invalid.

There are some cases when a written authorization is not required such as when:

- PHI is used for treatment, payment, and/or health care operations (TPO), or
- Other legal authority exists.

**NOTE:** If there are questions from VHA employees on legal authority to make disclosures, the Privacy Officer should be contacted prior to making the disclosure.

**Privacy of Photographs, Digital Images and Video and Audio Recordings**

The facility must post obvious signage at each entrance of the facility clearly stating the local policy regarding photography, digital imagery, or video/audio recording guidelines.

- A written consent must be obtained when a personally identifiable image, likeness, or recording of a member of the VHA workforce is produced or used by VHA.
- A consent form 10-3203 is not needed when staff communications using teleconferencing, video-conferencing, or other similar platforms are taken for official purposes. The consent is not needed whether or not the equipment and software are capable of producing photographs, digital images, or recordings that are accessible at a later time.
- Participants of office functions, staff meetings or holiday parties should be told they may be subject to photography, imaging, or recording. A consent form is not required.
- See VHA Directive 1078 “Privacy of Persons Regarding Photographs, Digital Images, and Video or Audio Recordings” for additional guidance.

**IMPORTANT:** VHA employees may not secretly take pictures or record conversations without the written authorization of the employee.
Lesson 5: Special Privacy Topics

In this lesson, you will learn about several special privacy topics that have not been discussed in previous lessons.

Specifically you will learn about:

- Release of 38 U.S.C. § 7332 Information
- Compensated Work Therapy (CWT)
- Subpoenas
- Logbooks
- Compliance
- Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record (VLER)

**Release of U.S.C. §7332 Protected Health Information**

38 U.S.C. Section 7332 makes strictly confidential all VA records that contain the identity, diagnosis, prognosis or treatment of VA patients or subjects for drug abuse, alcoholism or alcohol abuse, infection with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV/AIDS), or Sickle Cell Anemia. This statute applies to information whether or not it is recorded in a document or a Department record.

For example, a VHA health care provider's conversation discussing a patient's diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment would be protected by Section 7332. Finally, this statute protects records and information of the testing of individuals for HIV infection and sickle cell anemia, including negative test results.

Before making a disclosure of any 38 U.S.C. §7332 protected health information to an outside entity without an individual's authorization, VHA employees should determine:

- The type of information being requested, and
- Whether legal authority exists under the statutes and regulations to permit the disclosure

The following is a list of examples when 38 U.S.C. § 7332 information **cannot** be disclosed without specific authorization such as an authorization, standing written request letter, or written request.

- To non-VA health care providers (e.g. physicians, hospitals, clinics, and nursing homes) for treatment purposes or payment services.
- To an insurance company for payment purposes.
- To the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) for law enforcement purposes. VA OIG is required to provide a written request for Veteran information for law enforcement purposes.
- In court orders if there is 38 U.S.C. § 7332 information being requested a very specific court order will be required. Please consult your Regional Counsel.
- To officials of any criminal or civil law enforcement governmental agency charged under applicable law with the protection of public health or safety in response to a standing written request letter.
- For the purpose of health care referrals, to resident care homes, assisted living facilities, and home health services.
• To Federal, State, and/or local public health authorities for HIV reporting only, charged with the protection of the public health or safety pursuant to a standing written request letter or other applicable legal authority. Please consult the Privacy Officer.

The following is a list of situations where 38 U.S.C. § 7332 allows for the release of information without a signed authorization:

• For health care oversight activities a written request is not required and VHA may only disclose 38 U.S.C. § 7332 protected health information to the OIG for health care oversight activities.

• VHA may disclose any PHI to medical personnel to the extent necessary to meet a bona fide medical emergency including 38 U.S.C.7332 protected information.

**Compensated Work Therapy (CWT)**

Compensated work therapy (CWT) program members are considered patients — **NOT EMPLOYEES** — therefore they cannot be given access to Veteran PHI which is maintained by VHA. This includes computer systems and verbal or written access to PHI. Appropriate placement for individuals enrolled in the CWT program should be in positions with no access to PHI, which may include such areas as engineering, Acquisitions Material Management (AMM&S), groundskeeper, canteen/limited food service, and mail room mail sorter.

**Subpoenas**

A subpoena is a document issued by or under the auspices of a court seeking a release of records or requesting an individual give testimony before a court of law. A subpoena must be signed by a judge for VHA to disclose Privacy Act-protected records.

The facility Privacy Officer and Regional Counsel must be notified in all cases where any personnel receive a court order for the production of records or a subpoena for records.

**Logbooks**

A physical logbook is any written (i.e., not electronic) record of activities or events comprised of data which may uniquely identify an individual or contain sensitive personal information that is maintained over a period of time for the purpose of monitoring an activity, tracking information or creating a historical record. The following are examples of physical logbooks:

- Respiratory therapy logs
- Laboratory logs
- Autopsy logs
- Wound care logs
- Logs of cases cleared
- Printouts of Excel spreadsheets
- Access data base printouts

Physical logbooks containing sensitive personal information can only be created, used and maintained for a compelling business need as approved by the VHA facility director or the Program Office Director. A compelling business need is one that requires the capture of sensitive personal information for a policy, regulatory, accreditation or statutory requirement. Compelling business needs may support reasonable and appropriate business operations, patient safety or quality improvement efforts, or other
prudent and important health care operations needs such as the board certification of clinical staff including residents and trainees. Transition of physical logbooks to secure electronic logbooks and tracking systems is highly encouraged.

Physical logbooks are vulnerable to loss, theft or misuse of logbook content. Loss of control over a logbook can result in the compromise of sensitive personal information for multiple individuals, which could put individuals at risk for financial, reputational, or other harm and may result in a loss of trust in VHA's ability to secure sensitive personal information.

**Compliance**

All employees shall comply with all Federal laws, regulations, VA and VHA policies. Employees shall conduct themselves in accordance with the Rules of Behavior concerning the disclosure or use of information. The VA Rules of Behavior are delineated in VA Handbook 6500, "Information Security Program," Appendix G.

Employees who have access to VHA records or VHA computer systems shall be instructed on an ongoing basis about the requirements of Federal privacy and information laws, regulations, VA and VHA policy. Employees' access or use of PHI is limited to the minimum necessary standard of information needed to perform their official job duties. See VHA Handbook 1605.02, "Minimum Necessary Standards for Protected Health Information" for additional guidance.

Individuals who are convicted of knowingly and willfully violating the penalty provisions of the Privacy Act shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and fined not more than $5,000.

Any person who violates any provision of 38 U.S.C.§ 7332 shall be fined not more than $5,000 in the case of a first offense, and not more than $20,000 in each subsequent offense. A VHA employee who knowingly violates the provisions of *Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)* and the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA)*, by disclosing PHI shall be fined not more than $50,000, imprisoned not more than one year, or both. Offenses committed under false pretenses or with the intent to sell, transfer, or use individually identifiable health information for commercial advantage, personal gain or malicious harm have more stringent penalties. In addition to the statutory penalties for the violations described above, administrative, disciplinary, or other adverse actions (e.g., admonishment, reprimand, and/or termination) may be taken against employees who violate the statutory provisions.

**Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record (VLER)**

In April 2009, President Obama directed the VA and DoD to lead the efforts in creating VLER (Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record), which would "ultimately contain administrative and medical information from the day an individual enters military service throughout their military career and after they leave the military."
VLER utilizes the eHealth Exchange to share prescribed patient information via this protected network environment with participating private health care providers, but this does not involve 'scanned' patient information.

VLER benefits Veterans who receive a portion of their care from non-VA health care providers. Below are some of the benefits:

- Eliminates need to hand-carry health records.
- Allows VA and private health care providers to share access of up-to-the-minute health information.
- Veterans may opt-in or opt-out at any time.
- Participating providers will have a 'view only' option to see the Veteran's information once the Veteran has completed an authorization (VA Form 10-0485).
In this lesson you will learn about the elements of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Specifically, you will learn about:

- Elements of the FOIA
- Agency Records
- Employee Responsibilities
- Who Can Make A FOIA Request

**Elements of FOIA**
The basic purpose of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is "to ensure an informed citizenry, vital to the functioning of a democratic society, needed to check against corruption and to hold governors accountable to the governed." The FOIA establishes a presumption that records in the possession of agencies and departments of the executive branch of the U.S. Government are accessible to the people.

- FOIA is concerned with affording the most disclosure of information under law.
- The FOIA sets standards for determining which records must be disclosed and which records may be withheld.
- The law also provides administrative and judicial remedies for those denied access to records.

**Agency Records**
A valid FOIA request must be in writing and may be received by mail, e-mail, by hand or fax. Requests made under the FOIA must reasonably describe the records being requested. If VHA employees receive FOIA requests for any type of agency records they should be forwarded to the VHA healthcare facility's FOIA Officer.

Agency Records Are...
- Either created or obtained by an agency; and
- Under agency control at the time of the FOIA request.

Four factors for determining if an agency has "control" of the records:
- The intent of the record's creator to retain or relinquish control over the record;
- The ability of the agency to use and dispose of the record as it sees fit;
- The extent to which agency personnel have read or relied upon the record; and,
- The degree to which the record was integrated into the agency's records systems or files

**Employee Responsibilities**
The FOIA Officer will make all determinations regarding release of the requested records and employees must fully cooperate with the FOIA Officer in the handling of these requests. Specific employee responsibilities include:

- Searching for agency records at the direction of the FOIA Officer
• Fully documenting the FOIA search efforts to include time spent searching, search terms utilized, and identification of systems or files searched
• Providing responsive records to the FOIA Officer in a timely manner
• Being accessible to the FOIA Officer for questions/clarifications
• Compiling fee estimates at the direction of the FOIA Officer

Employees should not contact a FOIA requestor. All communications with a FOIA requestor must be made by the FOIA Officer.

You may find the appropriate FOIA Officer using the FOIA Officer Contact roster on the VA FOIA Homepage at

http://www.foia.va.gov/

Who Can Make a FOIA Request?

Virtually ANYONE, including:

• Private citizens
• Members of the media
• Members of Congress
• Corporations, associations, partnerships
• Foreign and domestic governments
• Unions
• Other federal employees, except when made in the official performance of their VA duties

The only exceptions to the above items are:

• Federal agencies may not use the FOIA as a means of obtaining information from other federal agencies
• Congressional oversight committees may not be denied information on the basis of a FOIA exemption
• Fugitives from justice, when the requested records relate to the requestor's fugitive status

Exemptions

There are nine exemptions that permit withholding of certain information from disclosure. It is the general policy of VA to disclose information from Department records to the maximum extent permitted by law. There are circumstances, however, when a record should not or cannot be disclosed in response to a FOIA request. When such an occasion arises, the FOIA permits records or information, or portions that may be segregated to be withheld under one or more of the exemptions.

Course Summary

During this course, you have learned about:

• Basic Privacy Statutes and Employee Responsibilities
• Veterans Rights
• Introduction to Uses and Disclosures of Information
• Authorization Requirements and Privacy of photographs, digital images and video and audio recordings
• Special Privacy Topics
• Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

For more information on Privacy and Release of Information, contact our facility Privacy Officer.

The Privacy Officer for
Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center
can be reached at
414 384-2000 Extension 41095

For a list of VHA Privacy Officers, go to http://vaww.vhaco.va.gov/privacy/vhapo.htm