

DEEOIC FY23 Focus Group Initiative

Background

Stakeholder feedback is one of the best ways to understand the experiences and needs of customers. Staff in the Division of Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation (DEEOIC) Outreach and Customer Experience Unit (OCXU) have been collecting feedback from stakeholders since FY2021, analyzing the data, and making recommendations for programmatic improvements. In Fiscal Year 2023, OCXU conducted a series of focus groups/stakeholder feedback sessions. The focus groups were developed as a means to garner additional and more in-depth feedback, to connect with our stakeholders face-to-face, and inform a journey mapping project.

The Focus Group Framework, which was developed in mid FY2022, can be found in Appendix A at the end of this report. Focus groups were held at in-person outreach events in locations throughout the nation in which there is a large DEEOIC claimant population. Outreach events are typically marketed via geographically targeted mailers, the DEEOIC website, radio and newspaper ads. Those who received the mailers were invited to participate in the optional focus groups.

Focus Group / Stakeholder Feedback Session Results

During the 60-minute guided discussions, participants were asked to share “pain points” and “bright spots” for different steps in the claims process. The claims process was divided into three broad parts, outlined below:

Paint points and bright spots for each stage – Current-state visioning:

1. **Filing a claim** (*navigating website or other informational sources, obtaining the form, working with Resource Centers to fill out, interactions with DEEOIC staff prior to submitting, submission method*)
 - Pain points and bright spots
2. **Process leading to decision** (*providing requested evidence, obtaining records, working with Claims Examiners and other DEEOIC personnel*)
 - Pain points and bright spots
3. **Receiving decision and after** (*Method of notification, waiver, written statement, request for review of written record, appeals, receiving payment*)
 - Pain points and bright spots

Future-state visioning:

1. **What changes could DEEOIC make to improve the experience of future claimants?**

At the close of the discussion, the Moderator will invite the participants to share additional feedback on topics that weren't covered in the discussion.

OCXU offered the focus group opportunity at three different outreach events, and successfully conducted 5 sessions. Two of the sessions were held at a Joint Outreach Task Group (JOTG) Town Hall event in Las Vegas, Nevada and three of the sessions were held at a workshop for Authorized Representatives (AR) in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Focus groups were offered at another JOTG Town Hall event in Shiprock, New Mexico, however none of the four stakeholders who expressed interest attended the session. Due to the demographics of the DEEOIC stakeholder population in this area, DEEOIC arranged for a Navajo translator for this event, which was not needed as the focus groups did not occur, however the translator was available for other parts of the event, such as providing translations to claimants obtaining claims status updates. Information about attendance in all focus groups may be found on the chart below.

Location	# of Focus Groups	# of Participants	Participant Type
Las Vegas, NV	2	15	Claimants and/or Authorized Representatives
Oak Ridge, TN	3	11	Authorized Representatives
Shiprock, NM	0	0	n/a

Overall, focus group participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to provide oral feedback and to meet in person with both DEEOIC staff and other claimants. In particular, claimants described enjoying being able to share knowledge and compare experiences with those who have gone through or are going through the same process. Bright spots and pain points identified during the sessions were similar to those that have been recorded through customer feedback surveys. While nothing new came to light, the exercise was valuable in that it provided more in-depth information and clarity on known issues. The bright spots and pain points reported by participants were analyzed and the most frequently reported items are listed below.

Common Bright Spots:

- **Resource Centers** were praised repeatedly, including the ability to visit in person, get information, and get assistance with forms and explanation of correspondence.
- Some **Claims Examiners** are very helpful and responsive, help explain correspondence and walk claimants through the process.
- Gratitude for **advocacy groups and attorneys** who helped with the process.
- Good **overall experience with DEEOIC and happy with program benefits.**
- **Helpful resources** including webinars, timeframes infographic, and increased availability of online forms.
- Happy with opportunity to attend **AR Workshop.**
- **Happy with benefits**, including lump-sum compensation and medical benefits/"white card."
- Participants expressed **gratitude for the focus group** and that they were able to "vent" and hear the experiences of others.

Common Pain Points:

- Issues with **forms and quantity of paperwork**, including general difficulty, functionality of some online forms, which require help from Resource Centers to complete.
- Issues with **DEEOIC correspondence**, including legal jargon, acronyms, too lengthy, and hard to understand.
- Issues **working with providers**, including doctors needing to include specific phrases in order to get approval, doctors not wanting to deal with the program, and specialists being booked too far out in order for claimant to meet DEEOIC deadlines.
- Issues with **collecting various records**.
- General **confusion and frustration with the process**, including many participants expressing that it's difficult to distinguish the roles of Home Health Care Companies, Advocacy Groups, Professional ARs, DOL/DEEOIC, and Department of Energy (DOE), and difficult to know the roles and responsibilities of each.
- Issues with **Claims Examiners**, some participants indicated that the assigned CE can "make or break" the experience.
- Lack of **program visibility**.
- Lack of **monitoring of Authorized Representatives**.
- General **difficulties with proving illness**: not knowing what an employee was exposed to, getting an accurate diagnosis, determining/proving exposure, lack of research on certain medical conditions.

Due to the relatively small number of customers in the focus groups, and the repetitive nature of the pain points and bright spots reported, OXCU does not have substantial programmatic recommendations as a result of this initiative. One of the pain points relating to the confusion between the roles/responsibilities of different organizations/agencies will be addressed in FY24 through the creation of a new fact sheet. OXCU will continue to develop handouts and informational material based on our feedback collections in order to help DEEOIC stakeholders have a more comprehensive knowledge of the program and the steps necessary to receive a decision on their claims.

The feedback gathered through these sessions was helpful to OXCU staff during the development of a customer journey map, providing deeper insight into the process that claimants go through, and what is perceived to work well or not work well during that process. One of the main takeaways of this exercise is that claimants sincerely appreciated the opportunity to speak and be listened to.

In Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025, OXCU plans to continue focus groups, with a shift in topic. As a High Impact Service Provider (HISP), DEEOIC has committed to developing more resources, trainings, and interactive tools for claimants. This action will be completed in Fiscal Year 2025. In order to develop tools that will be of the most use to customers, OXCU will hold focus groups to determine what resources, trainings, and tools our customers are currently using, and what can be developed to better meet their needs. Ideas for soliciting participants include promoting the opportunity on the website and during webinars, emailing the DEEOIC listserv and potentially reaching out to claimants by phone who have recently received a final decision.

APPENDIX A

DEEOIC Focus Group Framework

Group and Session Characteristics:

Each group will be comprised of up to 12 participants. Participants will be limited to stakeholders who have some existing experience with the program, either in the process of or already having filed a claim. Two separate sessions will be run, one for Employee and Survivor-Claimants and one for Authorized Representatives. If there are more than 12 people signed up for any given group, multiple sessions will be run, staff availability permitting. The sessions will be no longer than 60 minutes.

DEEOIC Staff Roles:

Moderator: The Moderator will guide the discussion using predetermined questions.

Assistant Moderator: The Assistant Moderator will take notes.

Focus Group Agenda

Welcome and Introductions:

- Introduce Moderator and Assistant Moderator.
- Explain the purpose of the session: To collect feedback on our customers' experiences with the DEEOIC program. Feedback will be used generate a report that will be shared with the agency's leadership. We will make recommendations to improve our programs and services based on these results. We want your input and want you to share your honest and open thoughts with us.

Ground Rules:

Moderator will share ground rules to establish group norms and to help the group run smoothly and respectfully for all participants. Ground rules will be displayed on a flip chart or white board.

1. There are no right or wrong answers, only different points of view. You don't need to agree with others, but we ask that you listen respectfully as others share their views.
2. Only one person speaks at a time.
3. It is important that we hear all sides of an issue – positive and negative. We want to hear a wide range of opinions.
4. Please turn off or silence your cell phones. If you must respond to a call, please do so as quietly as possible and rejoin us when you can.
5. What is shared in the room stays in the room. We want folks to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up. The results of this group will be reported on but names or other identifying information will not be used.
6. My role as moderator is to guide the discussion. The role of the assistant moderator is to take notes.

The Moderator will ask the participants if they have anything to add to the list. The note taker will add these to the list.

Establishing Rapport and Icebreaker:

The Moderator will ask participants to introduce themselves and to share the answer to an icebreaker question (ex: What DOE facility/ies did you work in and for how long?, etc.)

Discussion:

The Moderator will lead a guided discussion. At the beginning of the discussion, the Moderator will explain that we want to hear about pain points and bright spots for each step in the customer's journey. For the purposes of this session, we have identified three stages of the process that we will collect feedback on. These are (1) filing a claim, (2) the time/process between filing a claim and receiving a decision, (3) and receiving a decision and what follows. The Moderator will explain this to the group and present a visual for the participants. The Moderator will then ask the participants to report on pain points and bright spots for each of the stages.

Paint points and bright spots for each stage – Current-state visioning:

1. **Filing a claim** (*navigating website or other informational sources, obtaining the form, working with RCs to fill out, interactions with DEEOIC staff prior to submitting, submission method*)
 - Pain points and bright spots
2. **Process leading to decision** (*providing requested evidence, obtaining records, working with CEs and other DEEOIC personnel*)
 - Pain points and bright spots
3. **Receiving decision and after** (*Method of notification, waiver, written statement, request for review of written record, appeals, receiving payment*)
 - Pain points and bright spots

Future-state visioning:

1. **What changes could DEEOIC make to improve the experience of future claimants?**

At the close of the discussion, the Moderator will invite the participants to share additional feedback on topics that weren't covered in the discussion.

Wrap-up:

The Moderator will summarize the main themes of the discussion and thank the participants for their contributions.