The Veteran's Role in the Claims Process

Veterans submitting VA disability claims can work wonders in navigating the system by providing the complete information necessary, and our National Service Officers (NSOs) can provide sage advice to shorten the wait for benefits.

The VA has some promising new claims adjudication processes underway or planned this year, and our NSOs can provide explanations and tips that will help speed the development of successful claims decisions.

If VA must gather evidence for veterans, it takes time to obtain documents. If the veteran has his service medical records, he’s already trimmed months from the development process. For those newly separating from the armed services, it’s best to visit our Transition Service Officers (TSOs) on base with their medical records so that DAV can review them for possible injuries and illnesses that may be claimed. Veterans who left the service years ago and still retain their military medical records should provide them to an NSO for review. Without service medical records, the VA can spend months requesting them from the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Mo.

If a veteran has seen a private physician for a claimed illness or injury, obtaining those records is crucial. A correctly completed Disability Benefits Questionnaire (DBQ) may eliminate the need for a Compensation and Pension examination, again cutting months off the claims process. If
you are represented by DAV, any evidence to be submitted to support your claim, including completed DBQs, should be brought to your DAV NSO for review before submission to the VA. Upon review, your evidence will be submitted along with a memorandum citing relevant laws and/or regulations to be considered and ensuring confirmation of receipt by the VA. This helps us track your claim and evidence through the VA claims process.

There’s no doubt the VA’s development process is a lengthy one, involving research and time consuming requests seeking evidence until all avenues of information are exhausted. Without the veteran providing records up front, the VA will attempt to get all the records pertaining to a claim from the military, private hospitals or physicians or any other resource a veteran identifies.

Once a claim has been submitted to the VA, it must be considered to see if it is plausible. If it is, the review may take some time because of the claims backlog.

But if all the evidence has been obtained by the veteran: service medical records, DBQs, private health records, “buddy” letters, command histories, daily reports, affidavits of support and photos, it can be presented to the VA as a fully developed claim, circumventing a lengthy search for all evidence available.

The review by a ratings veterans service representative will initially decide the case. In claims that are represented by DAV, an NSO will examine the decision, allowing the chance to
intercede on the veteran’s behalf if there is an error. Once the claim is decided, it must be posted and can again take some time to process.

Veterans may contact the National Service Office in their area to inquire when an NSO can see them to review their records, determine the extent of their disability and sign a DAV power of attorney giving us the authority to represent them in their claim. A directory of National Service Offices is available at dav.org. Service members separating from the military should visit a TSO at a military separation center.

During the claims review process, veterans will receive several letters from the VA on the status of the claim, and providing forms as a formality. It’s best to contact an NSO if there are any questions about VA communications. Some letters from the VA regional office where a claim is being decided may request additional specific evidence or require a written response. An NSO can help to provide an appropriate reply.

Lastly, have great patience. Claims aren’t decided overnight, and some, such as those related to exposure to ionized radiation, covert operations and military sexual traumas, where records may be difficult to find, frequently take much longer. Being patient and allowing the process to move forward is easier than becoming frustrated over the lack of a decision.

Our NSOs are top-notch professionals who undergo constant training in the VA claims environment. Each year, we represent hundreds of thousands of clients and seek a speedy solution to
the backlog so that veterans can obtain their earned benefits. We work every day to fulfill the promises made to the men and women who served so they can lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity.