

Decisions on the spot

DAV and VA work together to provide expedited claims service at 96th DAV National Convention



Air Force veteran Ron Shelton (right) was able to complete a claim on site at the 96th DAV National Convention with the help of Brandon McKinney, a national service officer.

National service officers brought life-changing benefits assistance to veterans at DAV's annual national convention. And for the first time ever, claim adjudicators from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs were also on site to help expedite and finalize claims on the spot at this year's event in New Orleans.

"With so many members attending the DAV national convention each year, it only makes sense to bring our renowned claims assistance along with us," said National Service Director Jim Marszalek. "We were delighted to have not only our staff on site, but our partners at the VA as well, in order to best serve veterans."

This year, the VA provided staff at the event, including decision review officers and raters who could expedite and finalize claims, enabling service officers to provide ready-

to-rate cases to them for consideration in real time.

“When DAV approached me about this idea, I immediately saw an opportunity for two organizations with one common goal to work together and improve the claims process for veterans on the spot,” said Rob Reynolds, DAV past national commander and current deputy assistant secretary for disability assistance at the Veterans Benefits Administration. “The true credit belongs to the strong partnership between DAV and the New Orleans regional office employees, who helped make the event a success.”

National service officers met with more than 300 veterans at the 96th DAV National Convention in New Orleans. Senior Associate National Service Officer Brandon McKinney, based out of Togus, Maine, was one of the DAV staff members who provided claims assistance.

“When I first enrolled in VA benefits, someone helped me,” explained the Air Force veteran. “I’m paying it forward. That’s why we [service officers] are chosen for this job. Every single one of us wants to help veterans get the benefits they are eligible for through service.”

Hayward “Ron” Shelton was one of the first veterans McKinney met with in the Big Easy. It was the first national convention for the DAV life member from Chapter 6 in Hampton, Va., who was encouraged to attend by his wife Patricia, who serves as the adjutant of DAV Auxiliary Unit 6, and Past Chapter Commander Derek Mackey.

After Shelton, an Air Force veteran, retired from the U.S. Postal Service, his wife had convinced Mackey, who had served as best man at the Shelton wedding, to get him out of the house.

“And boy did he ever!” said Patricia Shelton, who explained that Mackey brought the couple into what she describes as the DAV family. More than a dozen from the Hampton DAV chapter and

DAV Auxiliary unit made the trek together to New Orleans.

Between business sessions, Patricia Shelton urged her husband to talk to a service officer after seeing the signage advertising benefits assistance.

"I walked in, and there was Brandon," said Ron. "I introduced myself, and the rest was history."

Ron Shelton had submitted a VA claim in the past but wasn't sure of the status or the way forward. McKinney looked him up and found the case in appeals. After speaking with the veteran, the service officer believed he could get him a higher rating that better reflected the severity of his post-traumatic stress.

"I was getting ready to cry," said Ron. "I said, 'Are you serious?'"

McKinney worked with the VA and confirmed an increased rating.

"I told my wife, and she started crying. My family means the whole world to me, and this is life changing," said Shelton. "It impacted us in ways I can't express. I'll be able to help my family now."

While serving in Vietnam as an air traffic controller, Shelton had a lot of experiences that continue to haunt him.

"I saw rockets fly by, and one of my best friends hung himself in our barracks," he reflected. The former airman understands that it isn't easy for a lot of people to discuss these experiences or get help for invisible wounds. He encourages fellow veterans to seek assistance through the VA and not be afraid to ask for support through that process.

"I'd tell anyone who has a claim in and isn't sure how things are going to come see DAV," added Shelton.

As for McKinney, he says the best part of his job is being

able to tell his wife that he does something great every day.

“I tell veterans what they need in order to obtain their earned benefits. I stay current with, and follow, federal regulations in order to best counsel clients on what or what not to do with each claim,” said McKinney. “The benefit I receive is the potential to change people’s lives.”

To which Shelton responded, simply, “He changed mine.”

Learn more

You don’t have to wait until the 97th DAV National Convention next year in Reno, Nev., to receive benefits assistance. Find your local national service officer by visiting dav.org/veterans/find-your-local-office.