



My Next Steps:

Understanding the VA Disability Claim Process for Transitioning Military Families



Question

Should my service member file a disability claim with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs? Why? When, where and how should the claim be filed?



Answer

Service in the military demands a great deal from those who join and from their families. For service members, the toll of military service may show up in the form of injuries, illnesses or other physical or mental health conditions. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs pledges support to veterans whose health is impacted by the demands of military service. While many factors determine the military and veteran benefits your family may receive after transition from the military, the VA's disability claim process is a key consideration in establishing eligibility for many VA benefits. For that reason, the VA encourages all service members to file a disability claim prior to transitioning from the military. As a military spouse, your encouragement and support to your service member in the VA disability claim process can help ensure access to those benefits.

An important part of planning for transition out of the military is understanding the following: the VA disability claim process, the VA disability rating system, and the VA benefits for which your service member and family may be eligible.

Purpose of filing a VA disability claim. A VA disability claim enables the VA to assess your service member's health in respect to the often-intense demands of military service. To prepare a VA claim, your service member will provide medical documentation to show that one or more injuries, illnesses or conditions are service-connected, which means they happened or got worse during military service.

Service-connected disabilities can include a wide-range of conditions such as hearing loss, sleep apnea, traumatic brain injuries, limb loss, muscle or joint injuries, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Even if you or your service member do not consider an injury or condition disabling, it is in your family's best interest to submit a VA claim during transition to ensure access to important benefits now and in the future.

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VA disability rating system and benefits. Disability ratings assigned by the VA describe how much a service-connected disability impacts your service member's daily life, especially in respect to his or her earning potential. Disability ratings assigned by the VA range from 0% to 100% depending on the severity of the condition as determined by the VA. Even a disability rating of 0% could make your service member eligible for certain benefits from the VA.

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Resources at a Glance

- [DoD Transition Assistance Program](#)
- DoD Transition Assistance Program [Virtual Curriculum](#)
- [Locate](#) a transition assistance office
- [Stand-alone online training](#) for family members



Answer (cont.)

Depending on your service member's VA disability rating, benefits may include non-taxable monetary compensation, enrollment in the VA health care system, a hiring preference for federal employment, vocational rehabilitation and employment eligibility and many other important benefits that help support your family after transition from the military and for life!

How you can help. As a spouse, you may know best the ways that military service has impacted your service member. Encourage and help your service member file a disability claim with the VA even if he or she thinks a condition is not serious. Filing a VA claim before transition is important in order to show a service connection. Once a service connection is established, your service member can apply for a rating increase later if a condition appears or worsens and a higher level of care or additional benefits are needed.

Where you can learn more and get assistance. If your service member is two years or less from separation or retirement from the military, learn about VA benefits and how you can help your service member prepare to file a VA disability claim now. Begin by attending the VA benefits

briefings with your service member during transition assistance training. If you are unable to attend the briefings in person, access them online. Learn more about the VA benefits available to your service member and your family by reviewing the VA websites and benefits guide listed in the Resources section. When your service member has about six months left in the military, contact a veteran service officer, an accredited VA representative or a professional at a local VA office to get free, personalized help in preparing a disability claim. To ensure the quickest processing of a claim by the VA, your service member may file a pre-discharge claim through the Benefits Delivery at Discharge program. To take advantage of BDD, your service member must submit a VA disability claim 180-90 days before his or her official date of separation from the military.

Your service member and family have earned the benefits pledged by the VA to those who protect and defend our nation. As a military family, you owe it to yourselves to apply for access to the care and benefits that are designed to help keep your family strong through transition from the military and for life!



Steps to Consider

These "Steps to Consider" are not meant as a checklist. Use the suggestions to facilitate a discussion with your service member.

- Watch the MySTeP Stepping Beyond video and download the fact sheet "Overview of Veterans Benefits for Transitioning Military Families" for information about the VA benefits your family has earned through military service.
- Contact your local transition assistance office to request to attend the VA Benefits and Services briefing with your service member. If you are unable to attend the classroom briefing, view the briefing [online](#) on Joint Knowledge Online.
- Visit the website va.gov and others listed in the Resources section to learn about the VA benefits available to your service member and your family. Many of these benefits have eligibility criteria based on the outcome of the VA's [disability claim and rating process](#).
- Watch the MySTeP Stepping Beyond video entitled "eBenefits for Transitioning Military Families." Ensure your service member is registered for an [eBenefits](#) Premium account.
- Remind your service member to schedule a [separation health assessment](#) or exit physical as soon as he or she is within the 180-day window from his or her separation or retirement date. In the meantime, encourage your service member to make medical appointments for any injuries, illnesses or medical conditions to ensure documentation of these conditions in his or her medical records.
- Begin to gather all supporting [evidence](#) and documentation required to file a [pre-discharge claim](#) with the VA. Some examples include the following:
 - Certified copies of your service member's military medical records which are available following the separation health assessment or exit physical.
 - Records or documentation that your service member may have from private health care providers, clinics or hospitals.



Steps to Consider (cont.)

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- Important personal documents, such as marriage certificates, divorce decrees, birth certificates, family member social security numbers, and bank routing and account numbers.
- Your service member’s DD 214 or separation paperwork from the [installation](#) personnel or transition assistance office. Keep the DD 214 in a safe and accessible place.
- Contact a [veteran service officer, an accredited VA representative](#), or a [benefits advisor at a VA facility](#) for free, personalized assistance with a disability claim and navigation of the complex VA benefits system.
- To take advantage of the [VA’s Benefits Delivery at Discharge program](#), ensure your service member files his or her claim 180-90 days PRIOR to his or her official separation date. The BDD program may enable your service member to receive his or her disability decision more quickly after separating or retiring from the military.
- If you have questions about your service member’s disability claim or about any VA benefits, call the veterans help line at 800-827-1000 for assistance.
- Learn what to expect [after your service member files his or her disability claim](#) with the VA, [how the VA assigns disability ratings](#), and [what to do after receiving the decision notice with a disability rating](#) from the VA.
- Safely file and keep all documents related to your service member’s medical condition(s) and disability claim(s). He or she may file [an increased claim, new claim, secondary service-connected claim, or supplemental claim in the future](#).
- If your service member is leaving the military with a dishonorable or bad conduct discharge, VA benefit eligibility may be impacted. Watch the Stepping Beyond video and download the fact sheet titled, “Leaving the Military with a Discharge or Dismissal that is Other Than Honorable.”



Resources

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Resources

- VA’s website: <https://www.va.gov/>
- VA’s Welcome Kit: <https://www.va.gov/va-welcome-kit-color.pdf>
- Veterans Benefits Administration: <https://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/>
- eBenefits: <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/homepage>
- Benefits Explorer: <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/about/feature?feature=benefits-explorer>
- VA Benefits Eligibility Matrix: https://benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/derivative_sc.asp
- VA disability compensation: <https://www.va.gov/disability/>
- Find a VSO or a VA-accredited representative to assist with claims or other VA benefits: <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/manage/representative>
- Find your nearest VA Facility: <https://www.va.gov/find-locations/>

