

Did You Know?

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That before I became a service officer for the American Legion I worked for thirty-three years with the Department of Veterans Affairs? For over three decades I assisted veterans and their survivors in filing claims with the VA, answering general benefits questions and guiding them through the paperwork process (commonly know as red tape). From the point of view of a government employee I noticed that often times the veteran is their own worst enemy when it comes to delays, misunderstandings and snafus with their claim. For this reason I have put together (like David Letterman) ten common mistakes and problem areas in claims processing. I will give you five this issue and the remaining five in the next newsletter. Pay attention. These simple suggestions can literally save months and months in the claims process.

ONE: Read the instructions first before you start. Although the print may be small and sometimes contains jargon you are not familiar with, the time spent reading them will pay off in the long run. For instance the VA claim for service-connected compensation and/or pension is over a dozen pages long. However if your intent is to file only for compensation you don't have to fill out half of it. And some of the questions will guide you to skip parts of the form. For instance question # 22 may state "if you lived with the veteran up until his/her death skip to question #27". Instead they fill out numbers 23 through 26. This causes the VA to wonder, was the widow/er separated from the vet?

TWO: Answer each question or put in N/A for not applicable. Some questions may seem trivia but they all serve a purpose. Leaving it blank may cause the VA to have to send out a development letter asking for the answers. This alone adds 60 more days to the process. If the space provided isn't enough to put in your answer or needs clarification then attach an additional sheet with more details. Example, the question is "what is your spouse's Social Security number"? Instead of leaving it blank because they don't have one, attach a separate sheet stating; regarding that question, my new wife is a foreign national, we just got married and she is in the process of applying for her Social Security number.

THREE: Use your claim or reference number. Contrary to a popular misconception the VA claim number isn't always the veterans Social Security number. For most veterans who applied for some type of VA benefit prior to 1970 they were issued a C or claim number. This number stays with the veteran during their lifetime and when they die their survivors keep the same number, except an X is added to make it an XC number. This is extremely important when a claim for compensation is reopened from a World War II, Korean or early Vietnam veteran. Their old military service medical records are often in that C-file and would not have been burnt in the St. Louis fire of 1973. Also, put your claim number on each document you submit in case they get separated. Staples are good but paperwork passes through a lot of hands and sheets do become unattached.

FOUR: Keep your address current. Most people move multiple times and if you don't inform the VA you may not get important letters regarding the claim. I can number in the hundreds where claims were denied because the veteran didn't report for an exam due to a bad address! Besides notifying the VA also alert the Post Office to forward you mail. They will do that for up to one year if you file the necessary form with the USPS. And avoid the classic excuse that I heard which was "I told the VA hospital of my new address, how come I still didn't get my mail"? The VA hospital system is separate from the VA benefits system and changes of address at one facility are not routinely shared. In fact many veterans use one address for their hospital appointment letters and /or their medicine and a different one for other mail.

FIVE: Save your correspondence. Keep copies of your original claim, any letters you received back from the VA and copies of any evidence you later submitted. Keep these in a separate file, in date order. This is invaluable to not only you but also to your American Legion service officer if they are helping you with the process. Knowing what has transpired with your claim, when you submitted evidence and the kind of evidence sent in will better help us when follow up is needed.

Look for more tips in my next article. In the meantime don't be your own worst enemy!