

Did You Know?

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That my article in the last newsletter covered the first five ways a veteran or claimant could help reduce the processing time when they file for benefits with the VA. These common sense tips will help a person get through the “Red Tape” which is associated with most large government agencies, and the Department of Veterans Affairs is no exception. Original service-connected disability compensation claims are taking an average of nine to twelve months. Appeals of VA denials can drag out over three years! So any ideas, how simple they may sound, are worth trying. Here are the final five pointers you can use.

SIX: Wait a reasonable time and follow up. Find out the averaging processing time a claim of your type will take to process and then contact the VA if you haven't heard anything. The claims process includes a series of letters from the VA asking for additional information, clarification of a certain evidence and your “due process” rights. If the VA sends you these letters and no response is received, the claim could be closed. Periodic status checks on your claim can avoid this problem. Back when I worked at the VA we didn't have many of the computer programs that are now in place. To answer a caller's question we would have to get the claims file, review it and get back to the caller. This sometimes took 7-10 days. Today, thanks to the VA's MAP-D program (Modern Adjudication Processing-Development) when a caller contacts the National Call Center (1-800-827-1000) asking about their claim, the VA employee can instantly access their file, see the last letter issued, print out a duplicate if needed, see what the issues are on the claim and see what evidence is still needed.

SEVEN: Pay attention to time limits. If your VA letter states you have 30 or 60 days to file or respond-believe it! Hundreds of claims get delayed or denied yearly simply because evidence or information was not received on time. If you wait too long, an entirely new claim may have to be filed. If you are a procrastinator and drop your response in the mailbox on the last day it's due, there could be delays. If that day is Friday, the mail might not be picked up till Monday and not even postmarked until Tuesday. And by the time its delivered to the VA several more days may pass and the time limit is over. On the other side of the coin when the VA gives “due process” and allows 60 days for a reply if you respond and tell the VA to take immediate action they don't have to wait the entire sixty days and can move on with your claim.

EIGHT: Keep notes. If you visit or call the VA get the name of the person who assisted you or answered your question, the date of the contact and the advice given. Due to the NCC (National Call Centers) you may not always be able to deal with the same VA person each time. But knowing who you dealt with before can sometimes make the job easier for the next VA employee who tries to help you. Notes are especially important if you need to file a complaint. A complaint about “someone” telling you to do something a certain way will carry less weight than if you say “On January 15th. Mr. Toczek advised me to submit VA form 21-986 to your processing center in St. Paul”. With the specifics VA supervisors can get back to their employees and refresh them on procedural errors.

NINE: Know and use your appeal rights. All VA decisions (except for certain doctor’s decisions on the course of treatment) can be appealed. All VA denials include an attachment spelling out the appeal process. No government agency is 100% perfect and mistakes can be made. If your case is one of those “mistakes” and you don’t appeal it, the only one who loses is you. And remember, if you have given the American Legion your Power-of-Attorney, one of our trained and accredited service officers will assist you without charge.

TEN: Share your knowledge. Once your claim has been satisfactorily processed, consider yourself a “mini-expert” in that area. If you know of someone else who might be in need of the same benefit share the experience you had with the VA. It is human nature for someone to more readily accept advice from a friend or relative than an informal government employee. And don’t forget your staff at the Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation office in Chicago is willing to assist them in all aspects of the claim.

There you have it. Between last month’s article and this one you have ten concrete suggestions. There is no guarantee these steps will alleviate all problems and delays, but they are bound to improve most situations. These ideas will help you smoothly navigate the byways of what sometimes can seem a daunting process.

And let me hear from you with your own tips. If I get enough I’ll share them in another article.