

Did You Know?

(By: Raymond P. Toczek Legion Service Officer)
312-980-4266 Raymond.Toczek@va.gov

That the topic of this article was first published in December of 2012. Many new readers to the Department newsletter have joined so I thought it is worth repeating with a few updates.

I have been a service officer for the American Legion going on 13 years and before that I was with the Veterans Administration for thirty-three years. I have noticed that often times the veteran is their own worst enemy and they do things which cause delays, misunderstandings and snafus with their claim. In this article “How to Avoid Government Red Tape.” I will run part one this issue and part two in the next one. Pay attention. These simple suggestions can literally save months and months in the claims process, get money to you in a timely fashion and help reduce the VA backlog.

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. 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 claimants 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 husband is a foreign national, we just got married and he 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 Era 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 during their lives 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 often 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. **IMPORTANT.** If you fax documents directly to the VA be sure to keep the fax receipt. That will be your proof that it was received by them.

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