

Douglas County Veterans Service Office

# Claims Handbook

**Good Things to Know**  
About How the Veteran Benefits Claims Process Works  
and  
*How the*  
**Douglas County Veteran Service Office**  
**Can Help You**



*The Douglas County Veteran Service Office  
helps Veterans and their dependents apply for benefits with the  
U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs.  
We will be your partner in making every effort to obtain the maximum benefit available to you.*



# Welcome

## We Are Glad You Are Here!

Thank you for coming in!

The VA Claims process can certainly be challenging!  
The Douglas County Veterans Service Officers (DCVSO) can help you:



- Understand benefits and eligibility ,
- Start or continue your Veterans Administration (VA) claim,
- Learn about the VA claims process,
- Guide you in presenting your claim to the VA and
- Assist you in securing all benefits for which you are eligible.

Our Service Officers are well qualified and legally Accredited with the VA, a requirement for assisting with VA claims. (A person who is not accredited with the VA may not help with claims per U. S. Code of Federal Regulations, Title 38, VA Rules and Regulations.)

*This Handbook describes how the claim process works and how the*

*DCVSO can help YOU!*

Please read this booklet completely... it contains a lot of important information to help you understand your VA claim and how it is processed. This booklet tells you how the Douglas County Veteran Service Office works to assist you with your claim. It also describes your rights and responsibilities as well as our responsibilities to you.

*We look forward to working with you toward successful claims.*

# Benefits Available to Veterans

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There are many types of claims and many different conditions may be claimed. The most common ones are listed here:

## **Service Connected Compensation**

Claims for disabilities that started in or are a result of military service and currently exist as a chronic disability. This type of claim usually requires that you received military medical care. Some conditions can be claimed even if you did not have the disability in service. These are “Presumptive” and secondary conditions. *Ask a VSO for more information.*

## **Housing Adaptation and Other Special Claims**

Veterans who have severe disabilities involving loss of use of hands or legs can apply for Special Housing Adaptations and Automobile claims.

## **Non-Service Connected (NSC) Disability Pension**

Pension is a benefit for Veterans who served 90 days or more qualifying service during a war-time. There are income considerations. Medical expenses can offset income. Higher levels of NSC Pension are available for those who are in Nursing Homes or Assisted Living facilities needing Aid and Attendance.

## **Aid and Attendance**

If a Veteran or surviving spouse requires the care of another person (Aid and Attendance or A&A), there are higher levels of Pension available.

## **Surviving Spouse and Dependent Claims**

There are benefits available for some dependents of Veterans. Dependency and Indemnity Compensation is available to spouse or dependents of a Veteran who dies of a service connected condition or was service connected at 100% Permanent and Total for 10 years or longer. This provides a monthly payment, health insurance and education benefits to dependents.

There is also a Pension for Survivors of Veterans (who served during War time) who have very low income or very high medical expenses or are in Assisted Living or Nursing Homes.

## **Burial Benefits**

VA has burial benefits available for Veterans who meet certain criteria. The DCVSO can answer questions about this benefit and help you apply for it if the funeral home did not do so.

## **Presidential Memorial Certificates**

We can order an embossed certificate for you that honors the Veteran for his/her service and acknowledges your loss. Any number may be requested.

# Effective Claims

*An effective Compensation claim for Service Connected disabilities has Three Parts:*

## **Proof of ONSET IN SERVICE or due to service.**

This means the disability started in or is due to military service. There needs to be something reference in your service medical record to the injury/illness. There are exceptions to this: the condition could be “presumptive” from exposures in service to such things as Asbestos, Agent Orange, Radiation, etc. You do not need to show you had it in the military but you need to have a current diagnosis of a disease that could be caused by these exposures. *Ask your Veteran Service Officer if you have questions*

## **Proof of a CURRENT CHRONIC CONDITION.**

Chronic means that a condition has continued from military service forward. Proof may include private medical records showing treatment or statements from friends or relatives. Employer statements may help. ***It is important that you have a current diagnosis of the condition and that you have been treated for it at least occasionally over the years.***

## **A LINK OR NEXUS to your military service.**

There must be a clear association that an event or exposure happened during service. Additionally you may ask your doctor to write a statement that your current disability is caused by an event or exposure in service or that “it is as likely as not” that there is a correlation between your service and the current disability. VA ***may*** order exams to explore this.

# Working with the VSO - At A Glance

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## Step One: File an Informal Claim-at the Veterans Service Office

For NEW claims (never filed before): Come to a new claim visit at the DCVSO Monday (except holidays) at 10:00 am.

- a. The Department Assistant will meet with you initially to create an electronic record for you by gathering your personal information such as name, address, social security number, date of birth and military service information.
- b. Afterward you will meet with our Veteran Service Officer who will file an Informal Claim and submit it to the VA Regional Office to protect your claim's effective date. You have one year from that date to submit the formal claim.
- c. We will schedule a formal New Claim Appointment and give you a list of items to bring to that appointment. Be sure to bring everything so your claim can get started.
- d. At the New Claim Appointment we complete the Formal claim paperwork and send it to the VA.

If you are new to our office, but already started a claim with VA and want to add to it we will create a file for you. We will need release forms completed. You may do this on Monday at 10:00 AM, or during Walk-ins in the afternoons on Mondays.

## Step Two: Gather your evidence - All claims

- New Claimants: We provide a list of items needed for your claim. Gather the records and bring them to the DCVSO during your formal "New Claim" appointment.
- New and existing claims: Mark each page of evidence with your name and claim number.
- We want to send all information to the VA at once to expedite the processing of your claim. If you decide to send in more information later, this will take the claim out of the expedited process and extend the time it takes. Sometimes, it is worth it to do this. Talk with your VSO about the pros and cons.

## Step Three: Wait for a decision

After you submit all the information needed for your claim (to the DCVSO), they are sent electronically to the VA. VA may schedule exams at VA facilities or send you a letter when they need more information. If VA sends you such a letter, it needs to be answered. Please bring the letter to the office during walk-in hours or call to schedule a short appointment.

# Tips for a Good Claim

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## Be Invested In Your Claim

It is important to recognize that the burden of proof is on you – the claimant. If the evidence isn't provided, the claim won't be granted.

For best results, make sure that you:

- Provide accurate information
- Find the evidence
- Identify every page by printing your name and claim number on them.

## Bring Non-VA Records to your New Claim Appointment

If you have seen non-VA healthcare providers, please bring a copy of your medical records to your new claim appointment. Mark the top right corner with the last 4 digits of your social security number.

## Research

Sometimes you will need to do research on your own.

If you are using the Internet to do your research, be sure to watch out for non-professional websites (.com or .net). The best evidence for VA claims is from websites that end with:

√ .edu    √ .org    √ .gov    √ .mil



Find scholarly articles that help make your point. Underline the parts that support your claim. You may ask your VSO for topics to explore.

## Track Your Symptoms



Get care and keep notes about how your disability affects your personal, social and work life. Then, when you have a VA exam, you will have notes to help you explain the effects of your disability to the doctor.

# VA's Claims Process

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You are strongly encouraged to submit as much evidence as possible with your claim to help minimize processing time. The length of time for claim varies depending on the complexity of the claim, the amount of evidence that must be gathered to support the claim, the type of evidence required and the timeliness of responses sent to VA.

## Your Claim goes through Eight Steps

There are eight steps that most claims for disability compensation follow once they are sent to VA Regional Office.

### **Step 1. Claim Sent/Received**

Your claim has been sent to the VA by DCVSO. It is received by the VA, a file is made (or pulled), a clerk does computer input. This part can take 2 to 4 weeks.



### **Step 2. Under Review**

Your claim is assigned to a Veterans Service Representative and is reviewed to determine if additional evidence is needed. If VA does not need additional information, your claim will move directly to the Preparation for Decision phase. This may take up to 3 months. If additional evidence is needed VA will send you a letter asking for evidence. This can add 3 to 6 months.

**Step 3. Gathering of Evidence**

The Veterans Service Representative will request evidence from the required Federal sources or doctors for which you provided releases. Additional requests for evidence may be made of you. It is common for claims to return to this phase, should additional evidence be required. VA now waits for the requested evidence to arrive. This may take 3 months or longer.

**Step 4. Review of Evidence**

If, upon review, it is determined that more evidence is required, the claim will be sent back to the Gathering of Evidence phase. This can add 3 months or longer.

**Step 5. Preparation for Decision**

The Veterans Service Representative recommends a decision, and prepares required documents detailing the decision. This may take up to 3 months. If more evidence is required, the claim will be sent back in the process for more information or evidence. This can add 3 months or longer.

**Step 6. Pending Decision Approval**

The recommended decision is reviewed by an authorizer, and a final award approval is made. This may take up to 3 months. If it is determined that more evidence or information is required, the claim will be sent back in the process for more information or evidence. This can add 3 months or longer.

**Step 7. Preparation for Notification**

Your entire claim decision packet is prepared for mailing. This may take 30 days or more.

**Step 8. Complete**

The VA sends a decision packet to you by U.S. mail. The packet includes details of the decision or award. This can take up to 2 weeks.

Reference: <http://www.benefits.va.gov/COMPENSATION/process.asp?expandable=0>

# Appeals

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VA will send you a rating and decision letter. Please always bring in every VA letter for us to review. We want to make sure it was granted correctly. The rating portion describes what was granted, what was denied and the reasons for each decision. When disabilities are granted, it describes the percentage of disability and the symptoms needed for the next highest rating. If you disagree with any portion of the letter, we can help you with the appeal process.

## **Notice of Disagreement (NOD)**

If you disagree with the decision, we will help you file a Notice of Disagreement. Please get your C & P records from the Roseburg VA so we can best help you with this process. You may always have a hearing at any point in the claim.

You will have two options on your NOD – A traditional appeal in which the same rater reviews the same evidence to see if they made any mistakes or a Decision Review Officer (De-Novo Review). We always recommend asking for a Decision Review Officer for this process. This gets a fresh set of eyes looking at your documentation. This process will result in a new decision.

## **Statement of Case (SOC)**

If your claim is not grantable after the Notice of Disagreement, you will get a Statement of Case. You have only 60 days from the date of the SOC to file the Appeal to the Board. It is critical to bring this in as soon as you receive it. A service officer will also discuss with you additional evidence that could help your case. If you want to pursue your claim with the Board, we will schedule an appointment with you to write your formal appeal.

## **Board of Veteran Appeals (BVA)**

At your SOC appointment, we will help you file the Form 9 to appeal to the Board of Veteran Appeals. After submitting the Form 9, you should expect 5-7 years before you will hear another decision on your claim. You may have a hearing with the judge.

## **Court of Appeals for Veteran Claims**

If the BVA denies your claim, you can file formal paperwork with the CAVC within 120 days of the BVA decision. This is where you will need a lawyer or other representative on your claim.

## Time Frames

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The process for claims is quite long. Generally the time from submission of the forms to a grant is as follows:

New claims: 18 months to 2 years

Notice of Disagreement : 2-3 Years

Board of Veteran Appeals decision: 5-7 years

It is very important to reply within the time frames to keep your claim active and moving forward in the process.

# Walk-Ins

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The DCVSO is available Mondays and Wednesdays for walk-ins. After your new claim appointment, you may follow up during walk-ins or call for a short appointment. You may use Walk-ins to get information or have VSOs review your evidence.

## Roseburg Walk-in Office Hours

Monday & Wednesday

1:00pm and 4:00 pm

Tickets are available at Noon.

You may also call for an appointment if your concern does not have a date deadline.

## Reedsport Outreach\*

Third Wednesday each month

10:00 am to 3:00 pm

## Canyonville Outreach \*

Fourth Wednesday each month

9:00 am to 11:30 am

*\*If you want to be seen at an outreach office, please call us ahead to schedule your time*

Much of the work we will be doing on your behalf occurs behind the scenes. We need all of the non-walk-in hours to get your paperwork put together and sent to VA, and do other advocacy activities required for successful claims. Each time someone interrupts the "behind-the-scenes" process, it delays everyone's claims.

# Frequently Asked Questions

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## Why Walk-Ins?

Much of our work happens when Veterans are not in the office. We need to have time to process paperwork and research complicated claims issues. During the time we are not seeing Veterans we research issues and medical evidence, advocate claims (maybe YOURS), work on appeals and complete paperwork. When someone comes in the office during NON-walk in hours, it interrupts our work on claims and **delays** the process for ALL Douglas County Veterans. Please, keep this in mind-- only drop in to the office during walk-in hours. Feel free to call to schedule a short appointment time during non-walk-in hours.

## How Do I Make an Appointment?

You will have a one hour appointment to write your new claim and then later to work on an appeal to the Board of Veteran Affairs (if needed). For follow up after this appointment, you may use walk-in hours (Mondays and Wednesdays 1:00 to 4:00 pm) or call to make a short appointment (Tuesdays or Thursdays, 1:00 to 4:00 pm). Contact us at 541-440-4219

## Could I just drop this off?

We cannot act in a timely manner when items are mailed in, faxed or dropped off. It is necessary and in your best interest to come to the office during walk-ins, talk to a service officer, provide the information needed by the VA, and sign papers for evidence to be included in your claim. **The DCVSO will not act on documents that are received through the mail or dropped off unless there is prior written permission from the VSO.** Such documents will be filed in the county file with no VA action. Please use walk-in hours for all claims work. Additionally, sometimes letters from the VA are time-sensitive and have critical deadlines. Dropping off letters and instructions from the VA may mean that the deadlines would not be met.

## If I am not willing to come in during the Walk-In Hours, what can I do?

You may call to schedule an appointment. Do this as soon as possible – some VA letters require a response within 60 days, if this is not done, your claim will end. Other options are using the e-Benefits website or mailing your own documents to the VA, however this is not usually the best option. VA claims are complex and even the VA recommends that you get assistance. If you choose not to use the DCVSO, you should get another Accredited Representative to help you. According to the VA Law (38 C.F.R. § 14.630), if a person is not accredited with the VA through a Nationally Recognized Veterans Organization they may not do more than ONE claim in their life. You should also be aware that no one can charge you for claims work until your claim has been denied and is in the appeals stage.

# FAQ's (Continued)

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VA has a program called E-Benefits in which you can apply for benefits and review status of your claim.

If you would like to enroll in e-benefits

**The VA website is:**

**[www.ebenefits.va.gov](http://www.ebenefits.va.gov)**

## **I heard VA denies all claims the first time, is that true?**

No. If you have strong evidence to support your claim: proof of onset in or link to service, a current condition and proof of continuity of treatment (have had the disability through life), then the claim has a high likelihood of being granted. If a claim is denied we can help you appeal unfavorable decisions.

## **How long will this take?**

The first decision will take 12-24 months. If you disagree with a decision, the next review level takes about two (2) years. If the claim remains denied, we can help you file an appeal to the Board of Veteran Appeals who will consider your case. This will take an additional three to five (3-5) years. VA is working hard to make the process faster but these are the current time frames.

## **How can I check the status of my claim?**

If you would like to check the status of your claim, call the VA Call Center

**1-800-827-1000.**

Keep in mind that this is a national call center, it is not in Portland where your file is. They can look at certain parts of the claim on a computer. Sometimes the information is not complete or not yet input. They may be able to tell you what the national standards are for how long the claims process takes. Many claims are not processed in these timelines and take much longer.

You will always hear from the VA before we do on any claims actions.

## Record Keeping

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It is a good idea to keep a copy of all information used in your claim. Our office provides copies of documents each time additional paperwork is done for the VA. Start a file and add things in chronological order.



VA Letters and Rating decisions are very important and should be kept indefinitely. They provide a great deal of information useful if you need to ask for increased ratings as disabilities worsen, or for appeals.

You can also make a request under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) for a copy of your claim file (“C-File”). The VA will provide only one copy for free so be sure to keep these.

## Notes

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Use this page to keep track of details of your claim such as the date you filed or requested changes and the disabilities you claimed.

Claim Number \_\_\_\_\_

Claimed Disability	Date	Granted %	Appealed Date

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# Notes

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# Rights of Clients

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As a Douglas County resident and client of the Douglas County Veterans Service Office (DCVSO) you have certain rights including:

1. The right to confidentiality for individually identifiable information to the extent provided under Federal and State law and the administrative rules of the Douglas County Health and Social Services Department. We cannot tell anyone about your claim without your permission.
2. The right to receive services from the DCVSO without discrimination.
3. The right to request reasonable accommodation if you have a disability.
4. The right to be accompanied by a service animal in the DCVSO offices within the parameters of the Law (See #6 under Responsibilities of Clients).
5. The right to file a report of discrimination or complaint with the Douglas County Health Department Administrator.
6. The right to be protected from retaliation for alleging discrimination due to disability or making a complaint.
7. The right to refuse our services.
8. The right to request information about services provided by the DCVSO.

## Responsibilities of DCVSO

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The Douglas County Veteran Service Office will:

1. Maintain confidentiality in all record keeping and communications when working on the claim.
2. Explain the requirements for each VA claim and entitlement program for which the claimant is eligible.
3. Assist in completing VA forms and requesting other Federal records.
4. Provide consultation and provide ideas about how to get evidence in support of your claim.
5. Identify possible sources of additional research for you to do that could support the claim.
6. Provide help through the claim process without discrimination.
7. Provide opportunities for feedback through Customer Comment Cards available in the office.

### **Accreditation**

It is the responsibility of the DCVSO to assure that VSOs are properly **accredited** with the USDVA. The Law (38 CFR 14.629) says that **Accreditation is required to assist with VA claims**, and it is against the law for non-accredited persons to do more than one VA claim. If someone volunteers to help you with your claim, always **ask if they are accredited**, who has **accredited** them and check it out ( <http://www.va.gov/ogc/accreditation.asp> ). If they are accredited they are listed on the VA website. Also, there is no such thing as a "certified" VSO. **Accreditation** is attained through yearly training and testing at Accreditation Training Conferences conducted by NACVSO (National Association of County Veterans Service Officers), MOPH (Military Order of the Purple Heart), DAV (Disabled American Veterans), AL (American Legion), FRA (Fleet Reserve Association), TREA (The Retired Enlisted Association), etc.

# Nondiscrimination

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The DCVSO does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, gender, disability, political beliefs, age, or religious creed. The following acts of discrimination on grounds of race, color, sex, disability, political beliefs, age, religious creed or national origin are specifically prohibited:

1. Denying an individual any service, financial aid, or other benefit provided under any program.
2. Providing any service or other benefit to an individual that is different, or provided in a different way from that provided to others under the program. The exception is to render individuals with disabilities additional aid or service as necessary to make the service as effective as the service provided to others.
3. Subjecting an individual to segregation or separate treatment in any way related to receipt of any service or other program benefit.
4. Restricting an individual in any way from any advantage or privilege enjoyed by others receiving any service or other benefit under any program.
5. Treating an individual differently from others in determining whether they satisfy any admission, enrollment, quota, eligibility, membership or other requirement or condition individuals must meet to be provided any service, financial aid, or other benefit provided under any program.
6. Denying an individual an opportunity to participate in any program or afford them an opportunity to do so that is different from that afforded others under the program.
7. Denying a person the opportunity to participate as a member of a planning or advisory body that is an integral part of the program.
8. Retaliation against an individual for filing a complaint or report

## Responsibilities of Clients

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Responsibilities of Clients who work with the Douglas County Veterans Service Office (DCVSO):

1. Provide true, complete, and accurate information.
2. Authorize the DCVSO to release individually identifiable information in support of your claim, according to Federal, State and Department rules, to other Agencies such as United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA), ODVA, etc.
3. Be an active participant in YOUR claim process. The DCVSO will help you identify possible sources of information that could support your claim. ***It is the claimant's responsibility to seek out necessary and/or required information and bring it to the DCVSO to submit in support of your claim.***
4. Comply with our Office requirements – please visit the office only during walk-in hours or when you have a scheduled appointment. These hours are posted in the office, on our business cards and found on the back page of this booklet.
5. If applying for any benefit that is income-related:
  - a. Report all changes in income *immediately* to the DCVSO *in person* because you will have to sign a statement about the changes and the dates of the changes. This statement will be used to notify the VA.
  - b. Financial reports for VA claims: The Veteran Service Office cannot complete financial paperwork for you. We may help complete other parts of forms but the claimant must complete the financial answers and sign the forms.
6. Understand that only trained service animals may accompany you to the office. Staff may ask if your animal is a service dog and how the dog helps you.
7. Alcohol/Mind-altering substances. Please DO NOT visit the DCVSO under the influence of alcohol or other mind altering substances. Understand that you may be asked to leave the office and return when you are not under the influence. Non-compliance may result in a call to 9-1-1.
8. Safety – Behaving in ways that respect the rights and safety of others.
9. Please talk quietly in the Douglas County Veteran Service Office while awaiting your turn with a service officer. You may take louder conversations, video games and cell phone conversations into the hallway. The DCVSO staff may ask you to step outside the office when you engage in these activities.

## Roseburg Office

The main office is in the Old Courthouse,  
1036 SE Douglas, Room 8  
(basement level)

### Walk-in Hours in Roseburg are:

**Monday & Wednesday**

**1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.**

*A ticket number machine is available at noon on these days.*

### Follow up Appointments in Roseburg are:

**Tuesdays and Thursdays**

- Call 541-440-4219 to schedule

We also do outreach in other areas of Douglas County at each of these locations:

#### **Reedsport:** (County Annex)

3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday, 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 pm.

#### **Canyonville:** (Pioneer Plaza, Health Department Office, near DMV)

4<sup>th</sup> Wednesday, 9:00 am to 11:30 am

#### **Yoncalla:** (Community Center)

For availability: Please call 541-440-4219

Please call to schedule an appointment for Outreach Visits at 541-440-4219

# Rights and Responsibilities Acknowledgement

I have received the Douglas County Veterans Service Office Claims Handbook. I have read and understand the Client Rights and Responsibilities outlined in the Claims Handbook.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Last 4 of SSN

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Staff Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date