

Receive benefits sooner by filing claims before separation

Active duty military and full-time Reserve or Guard considering leaving military service can cut the time in half that it takes start receiving their veterans' benefits by planning ahead.

It is to your advantage to submit your disability compensation claim prior to separation, retirement, or release from active duty or demobilization. Processing times tend to be much shorter for claims submitted pre-discharge than after discharge. Pre-discharge programs provide service members with the opportunity to file claims for disability compensation up to 180 days prior to separation or retirement from active duty or full-time National Guard or Reserve duty (Titles 10 and 32).

The Departments of Defense and Veterans Administration work together using the Integrated Disability Evaluation System to make disability evaluation seamless, simple, fast and fair. By using this system while on active duty, you can receive a proposed disability rating before leaving the service.

While in a pre-discharge program, you may also apply for other VA benefits, such as Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, Education, and Loan Guaranty.

There are basically three processes to accomplish this connection to benefits or at least speed up the process.

- **Benefit Delivery at Discharge:** The most common process is called Benefit Delivery at Discharge, and the VA has a goal of getting benefits started under this program with 60 days after discharge. Service members can start as early as 180 days prior to their separation or discharge date. The program requires a minimum of 60 days to allow sufficient time to complete the medical examination process (which may involve multiple specialty clinics) prior to separation from service. BDD is available to all service members on full-time active duty, including members of the National Guard and Reserve.
- **Quick Start:** If you are closer than 60 days to separation from service, submit a Quick Start claim, the second most common process. Quick start claims are for service members with one to 59 days remaining on active duty or full-time Reserve or National Guard service, or service members who do not meet the Benefits Delivery at Discharge criteria requiring availability for all examinations prior to discharge.
- **Overseas Intake Sites:** There is also a process available at selected sites in Germany and Korea called Overseas Intake Sites that should be started within 180 days prior to discharge. For information on these programs email GermanyBDD.vbapit@va.gov or osan.fsc@osan.af.mil

To file a BDD or Quick Start claim, service members should stop by the County Veterans Service Office for help completing VA Form 21-526C (Pre-Discharge Compensation Claim). The form will be submitted along with your service treatment records (originals or copies) to the VA. You may also do this online using your e-benefits account.

The concept behind these options is to have all of the compensation and pension exams completed prior to your separation date and actually start receiving VA benefits two months after discharge. The VA

always pays in arrears and if you were discharged on the first of the month, payment would not be received until the end of the month.

Given that VA claims for disability may take four to 12 months to process once you are out of the military, it makes sense to try to get the exams done while you are still in service. If you choose to file after you get out, please come by our office with a copy of your DD-214 and your complete service treatment records that can be sent to the VA.

We also advise you to come in and file if the military gave you a rating when you were discharged. Many times this rating is too low and other issues were omitted.

Ted Puntillo is director of Veteran Services for Solano County. Reach him at 784-6590 or tepuntillo@SolanoCounty.com. The Solano County Veteran Services Office, 675 Texas St. in Fairfield, is open from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday.