

TDVS Benefits Bulletin
COVID-19 Updates & Remote Claims Assistance

V3 – 4/9/2020

APRIL 1, 2020 UPDATES

April 9, 2020 UPDATES

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TDVS Updates

Hearings

The Board of Veterans Appeals has suspended all Travel Board and Video Teleconference hearings through May 1st. The Appeals Division has contacted all veterans that were scheduled for a Travel Board hearing the week, March 23 to 27th and all veterans that have been scheduled for a Video Teleconference hearing through May 1st. We are working with individual clients to facilitate Virtual Hearing opportunities.

The Regional Office has suspended in-person local hearings (Decision Review Officers, pre-determination, etc.) and begun offering veterans the opportunity for an informal telephone conference. The Appeals Division is in the process of contacting all veterans that have been scheduled for a local hearing in March or April to provide counsel on whether to move forward with a telephonic informal conference or postpone.

[VA Video Connect for iOS Devices](#) and [Web User Guides](#) are available to assist veterans in accessing the technology that is required for Virtual Hearings.

Contacting the Appeals Division

Please continue to use the Appeals Division's main line number 615-695-6385. You can also continue to reach us using the Appeals Division's business email box at tdva.vbanas@va.gov. In addition, employees have been provided cell phones in order to be more responsive to your needs. These numbers can be found on [TDVS's website](#).

VA and Veteran Benefit Updates

VA Suspends In-Person Compensation and Pension (C&P) Examinations

VA has suspended in-person C&P examinations. [Virtual alternatives](#) are available including:

- Acceptable Clinical Evidence (ACE) – This method may be based solely on the medical evidence of record or may involve an examiner calling a veteran to ask some questions.
- Video or Tele-C&P Examinations – This method allows a veteran to remain in his or her home and teleconference with the medical provider.

[VA Video Connect for iOS Devices](#) and [Web User Guides](#) are available to assist veterans in accessing the technology that may be required to perform these types of examinations or other VA telehealth opportunities.

VA has provided guidance to C&P vendors to complete scheduled examinations via ACE or telehealth when possible and keep remaining examination requests open. This will allow VA to issue partial decisions and defer remaining issues until such time as the remaining in-person C&P examinations can be conducted. The intent is to get benefits flowing when possible.

VA has also provided guidance to claim adjudicators to not deny pending claims as the result of failure to attend an in-person C&P examination.

VA Text Message Updates - COVID19 Updates

If COVID-19 is causing you concern, Annie may be able to help you. Annie is VA's automated text messaging app that sends health information and reminders to you. Any cellphone with texting capabilities can receive Annie messages. Annie's Coronavirus Precautions protocol messages can help you monitor symptoms and can advise you when to contact your VA care team or a nurse triage line.

The messages also provide general wellness tips and steps you can take to protect yourself. Annie is a VA service that sends automated text messages to Veterans to help them stay focused on their self-care. This might include health related notifications, reminders, or motivational messages. Annie also empowers Veterans to play an active role in their care, by prompting them to provide health data such as weight or blood pressure. Thousands of Veterans successfully use Annie to stay healthy and on track in meeting their wellness goals.

[Registering](#) for Annie is fast and easy. Once registered, Veterans can subscribe to several protocols right away. Here's a [flyer](#) you can share with interested veterans.

Disability Benefit Questionnaires

VBA has discontinued the use of public facing [Disability Benefit Questionnaires](#) (DBQs). Veterans should continue to provide private medical evidence that is relevant to their claim.

Board of Veterans' Appeals

The Board of Veterans' Appeals (Board) has taken [several steps](#) to respond to COVID-19. The Board has suspended all travel board, video and Central Office hearings through at least May 1, 2020. Virtual hearings remain available. Appeals Division team members and Board employees have attempted to contact all veterans scheduled for a hearing in March, April and May.

The Board will Advance on the Docket (AOD) appeals for veterans who have been diagnosed with COVID-19. TDVS's Appeals Division can assist with requesting an Advance on the Docket if you have a client that's been diagnosed with COVID-19 and has a pending appeal at the Board.

During this National emergency, the Board will accept typed signatures on AMA Notices of Disagreement (NOD) VA Form 10182, in lieu of a wet signature.

Relief Package Direct Payments and VA Pension

VA has indicated that the direct payments from the recently passed relief package will not be counted as income or resources for the purpose determining eligibility for pension.

Fiduciary Operations

Field examiners are conducting interviews over the phone or over video conferencing with face-to-face interviews conducted in emergency situations only.

Filing Timeliness and Deadlines

VA has not relaxed or modified the filing deadlines for compensation and pension claims and appeals. However, VA regulations provide flexibility for veterans to meet existing timelines by requesting to extend the filing periods of certain documents for good cause. For example, VA can extend filing periods for good cause for the following:

- To perfect claims (38 CFR 3.109(b));
- To challenge adverse decisions (38 CFR 3.109(b));
- To submit Notices of Disagreements (38 CFR 20.203(c));
- To submit Substantive Appeals (38 CFR 19.53); or
- To respond to Supplemental Statements of the Case (38 CFR 19.53).

On March 26, 2020, VA provided notice to claims processors that, if a claimant requests an extension based on the COVID-19 pandemic, VBA will grant the extension under the good cause provisions provided the time limit would have expired on or after March 13, 2020 (the date the President declared that the COVID-19 outbreak constituted a National Emergency).

GI Bill Benefits to Continue During COVID-19 Pandemic

[Legislation](#) signed into law on March 21, 2020 allows VA to continue providing the same level of education benefits to students having to take courses online due to the Coronavirus outbreak. Students with specific questions should contact the Education Call Center at 888-442-4551 between 8 a.m. – 7 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday-Friday.

Debt Management Center

VA's Debt Management Center (DMC) is offering certain temporary financial relief to veterans or family members that have a VBA benefit debt, are affected by COVID-19, and need temporary financial relief. Please contact DMC at 1-800-827-0648 to request assistance.

Relief options available to veterans include suspending debt collection and adapting payment plans to best suit an individual veteran's situation. DMC is currently offering veterans a few options regarding their individual debts, the first of which is to completely suspend collection until May 31, 2020 and the second is to establish a repayment plan, of up to 60-months, where the veteran does not have to submit any additional financial documentation.

Home Loan Program

VA's Home Loan Program has published [Circular 26-20-7](#) that outlines special relief for those potentially impacted by COVID 19.

Practice Like a Pro - Tips for Remote or Virtual Assistance

Filing Timeliness and Deadlines

Practically, VA guidance is to request a good cause extension at the same time as filing the late application or appeal. The VBA Call Centers and VSO lines can annotate a request to extend an evidentiary submission deadline by 30 or 60 days via phone. There is no standard form requirement to request an extension of a filing deadline.

Establishing Representation Using eBenefits

Veterans with an eBenefits account can request representation using this online tool. Here's a [step-by-step guide](#) that you and clients can use to establish representation using eBenefits. TDVS employees monitor these requests daily in order to establish representation.

Veteran or Claimant Signatures

With limited exceptions, VA has not relaxed or modified the signature requirements for compensation and pension claims and appeals.

The only exceptions are for certain Vocational Rehabilitation forms such as VBA-28-1900 and VBA-28-8832 and the VA Form 10182 (Decision Review Request: Board Appeal). On these forms, the typed name of the veteran or claimant will suffice for a signature.

All other forms continue to follow existing guidance that requires a wet, electronic or digital signature and is outlined in more detail below.

What forms can a representative sign?

Representatives have the authority to prepare and submit certain types of claims and other claim-related documents on behalf of the represented individual without that individual's signature. These include but are not limited to –

- Intent to file (ITF) a claim
- Supplemental Claim
- Request for higher-level review
- Legacy Substantive Appeal

A POA may prepare, but may not sign, documents that require the claimant's signature, which include –

- Original Applications for Veterans Benefits
- Forms Requiring Claimant Certification

Please review [VA's M-21 Adjudication Procedures Manual](#) – I.3.A.4.b. – for additional information.

Accessing VA Systems (VBMS; SHARE) Through Desktop

You can now access VA Systems such as VBMS and SHARE through a desktop application available via citrix. This method of accessing VA systems provides a quicker connection and reduces the timing out that frequently occurs when accessing through the RO5VBAAPPS folder. Instructions for navigating to VBMS and SHARE using the desktop are available [here](#).

VSO Hotlines

VA has a dedicated VSO hotline -- 855-225-0709 -- that can assist service officers in answering common questions or addressing common issues. This number is dedicated to service officers who are assisting veterans or family members and should not be used by individual claimants seeking VA assistance.

For example:

- Change of Address – The VSO hotline can be used to quickly update a veteran or claimant’s mailing address for purposes of compensation benefits.
- Dependency Claims – The VSO hotline can initiate a simple dependency claim over the phone.
- Direct Deposit – The VSO hotline can quickly update a veteran or claimant’s direct deposit information.
- Status of Claim – During quality review, the Appeals Division has seen VA Forms 21-4138 with statements such as “I would like the status of my pension.” Or “Would like status update on my claim (Appeal) please?” The VSO line, or in the alternative VBMS or TDVS’s Appeals Division, would allow you to provide a better update than any response you might receive from filing a 4138 regarding the status of a claim or appeal.
- Notice of Death – The VSO hotline can be utilized to report a veteran or claimant’s death to VA and to collect information, such as whether the veteran had service-connected conditions or VA life insurance, necessary to assist surviving family members with survivor benefits.

VA’s [Debt Management Center](#) also has a dedicated VSO hotline – 612-970-5737 – that can assist service officers in addressing questions and concerns related to debts incurred as a result of participation in a VA benefit program.

VA’s Pension Management Center can also be reached via phone at National Call Center for general questions regarding claim status: 1-877-294-6380. The Milwaukee PMC has a VSO



telephone number for emergency/priority cases: 414-902-5062 (8:00am to 4:00pm – Central Standard Time).

TDVS Benefits Bulletins Can Be Found on the [VSO Tools](#) Portion of TDVS's Website