Worth Their Weight · Connecting Vets to What's Theirs

VSO Prep Packet

Get ready for your first meeting with a Veterans Service Organization.

Need help with this packet? Call us.

833-989-8387

It's free. Family members can call too.

Who this is for

Any veteran getting ready to file for VA benefits. A spouse or family member can use it to help. You do not need a diagnosis or any paperwork to start.

What a VSO is

A Veterans Service Organization (VSO) has representatives the VA has accredited to file your claim and represent you. They work for you, not the VA. An accredited VSO never charges you.

They advise on the claim and file it. That part is theirs, not ours.

The four parts of this packet

PART 1 **Things you might be carrying.** Check what sounds like you.

PART 2 **Finding your DD-214.** The one record that matters most.

PART 3 **Your first meeting.** What to bring and what to ask.

PART 4 **After you file.** How to check on your claim.

Rather file on your own? That works too. Our free steps and the VA's short video are at **worththeirweight.org/do-it-yourself**.

PART 1

Things You Might Be Carrying

Many veterans live with something for years without connecting it to their service. Read the list. **Check anything that sounds like you.** Then bring the list to your meeting.

> **This is not a claim form.** Checking a box does not mean you qualify for anything. It means it is worth raising with your VSO. They decide what gets filed. We do not advise on that part.

1. Back, Joints and Body

- [ ] Low back or neck pain that never fully went away
- [ ] Knees, hips, ankles, or shoulders that ache or give out
- [ ] Stiffness or reduced range of motion in a joint
- [ ] Foot pain, plantar fasciitis, or old ankle sprains
- [ ] Arthritis in a joint you injured in service
- [ ] Muscle weakness or loss of strength from an old injury
- [ ] An old injury that flares up with weather or activity

2. Hearing and Ears

- [ ] Ringing or buzzing in the ears (tinnitus)
- [ ] Trouble hearing in noise or asking people to repeat
- [ ] Ear pain or recurring infections
- [ ] Dizziness, vertigo, or balance problems

3. Eyes and Vision

- [ ] Vision loss or worsening eyesight since service
- [ ] Chronic dry eye or light sensitivity
- [ ] An eye injury or exposure you never had looked at

4. Mental Health

- [ ] Reliving things that happened, or working hard to avoid them
- [ ] Feeling on guard, jumpy, or uneasy in crowds
- [ ] Depression, low mood, or loss of interest
- [ ] Anxiety, panic, or a racing mind
- [ ] Anger or irritability that costs you at home or work
- [ ] Effects of military sexual trauma (MST)
- [ ] Drinking or using more than you want to

5. Sleep

- [ ] Trouble falling or staying asleep
- [ ] Nightmares or waking up on edge
- [ ] Snoring, gasping, or being told you stop breathing (sleep apnea)
- [ ] Exhausted no matter how long you were in bed

6. Head and Nerves

- [ ] A head injury, blast, or concussion in service (TBI)
- [ ] Headaches or migraines
- [ ] Memory, focus, or word-finding trouble
- [ ] Numbness, tingling, or nerve pain in hands or feet
- [ ] Shooting pain down a leg or arm (sciatica, pinched nerve)
- [ ] Seizures or blackouts
- [ ] Tremors or shaking

7. Breathing

- [ ] Asthma, wheezing, or shortness of breath
- [ ] Chronic cough or bronchitis
- [ ] Sinus trouble or a chronically stuffy nose (rhinitis)

8. Heart and Circulation

- [ ] High blood pressure
- [ ] Heart disease or chest pain
- [ ] An irregular or racing heartbeat
- [ ] Varicose veins, poor circulation, or blood clots

9. Stomach and Digestion

- [ ] Acid reflux or heartburn (GERD)
- [ ] Irritable bowel, chronic diarrhea, or constipation (IBS)
- [ ] Ulcers or ongoing stomach pain
- [ ] Liver, gallbladder, or pancreas trouble
- [ ] A hernia

10. Skin and Scars

- [ ] Chronic rashes, eczema, or breakouts
- [ ] Scars from injuries or surgery
- [ ] Skin changes from sun or chemical exposure

11. Hormones and Metabolism

- [ ] Diabetes or blood sugar problems
- [ ] Thyroid trouble
- [ ] Unexplained weight or energy changes

12. Urinary and Reproductive

- [ ] Bladder or kidney problems
- [ ] Sexual dysfunction or reproductive issues
- [ ] Women's health conditions tied to service
- [ ] Conditions that showed up after a service injury or medication

13. Dental, Mouth and Jaw

- [ ] Jaw pain, clicking, or trouble opening (TMJ)
- [ ] Teeth lost or damaged from a service injury
- [ ] Chronic mouth or gum problems from service

14. Blood, Immune and Chronic Illness

- [ ] Anemia or a blood disorder
- [ ] An autoimmune condition
- [ ] Constant fatigue or widespread body pain (chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia)
- [ ] Lasting effects of an infection (hepatitis, and others)

15. Cancer

- [ ] Any cancer, active or in remission
- [ ] A cancer you believe is tied to a service exposure
- [ ] Lasting effects of cancer treatment

Were you around any of these?

Exposures during service can be tied to conditions that show up years later. If any of these are part of your story, say so at the meeting. You do not have to know the connection. That is what the VSO is for.

- [ ] Burn pits, smoke, or airborne hazards (Iraq, Afghanistan, and others)
- [ ] Agent Orange or other herbicides (Vietnam era and beyond)
- [ ] Contaminated water at Camp Lejeune
- [ ] Radiation or nuclear materials
- [ ] Gulf War service and unexplained chronic symptoms
- [ ] Asbestos, solvents, fuels, or industrial chemicals

Anything else you want to bring up?

Write it here so you do not forget.

PART 2

Finding Your DD-214

Your DD-214 is your discharge paper. It is the record your VSO needs most. If yours is lost or damaged, you can get a new copy, and it is free. If you get stuck, call us and we will help you request it.

> **Ask for the long form, called Member Copy 4.** It shows your character of discharge. The short form leaves that off. Never pay a website to get your records.

First, check close to home

- **Look through your own papers.** Many families keep it with other important records.
- **Call your county clerk or recorder.** Many veterans filed a copy there when they got out. Try the county where you lived at the time.

If you still need a copy, there are three ways

1 By mail or fax. No computer needed.

Best for most people. Also the way for family of a veteran who has died.

1. Get Standard Form 180 (SF-180). Call us and we will mail you one, or print it at **archives.gov/veterans**.
2. Fill it out. Ask for the DD-214, Member Copy 4. Sign and date it.
3. Mail it to the address on page 3 of the form. Or fax it to **314-801-9195**.

2 Online at the National Archives.

Best if you are comfortable online, or someone can sit with you.

1. Go to **vetrecs.archives.gov** and start a request.
2. The site will ask you to prove who you are through a service called ID.me. Have a photo ID and a phone ready.
3. Ask for the DD-214, Member Copy 4.

3 Online at milConnect.

Best if you left the service in recent years.

1. Go to **milconnect.dmdc.osd.mil** and sign in with a myAuth account. myAuth replaced DS Logon in 2026.
2. Look for your personnel file and request your DD-214.

How long it takes. It varies. The records center receives thousands of requests a day. They ask you to wait 90 days before sending a second request. To check on yours, call **314-801-0800**.

Need it fast?

- **For an emergency,** call the records center at **314-801-0800** and say it is an emergency. Staff answer weekdays, 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Central. Hold times can be long.
- **For burial at a VA National Cemetery,** call the scheduling office at **800-535-1117**. They get the records for you.
- **For any other burial,** the next of kin can fax a signed SF-180 with proof of death to **314-801-0764**.

Special situations

The veteran has passed away

A surviving spouse who has not remarried can request the records. So can a parent, child, brother or sister. Use the SF-180 (way 1) and include proof of death.

Records lost in the 1973 fire

A 1973 fire at the records center destroyed millions of Army and Air Force files for people discharged between 1912 and 1964. If yours was one of them, the records center can often rebuild proof of service from other records. Ask them to reconstruct it.

Something on it is wrong

Errors are corrected with a form called a DD-215. It attaches to your DD-214. An accredited VSO can walk you through it.

PART 3

Your First Meeting

The meeting is a conversation, not a test. Your VSO representative is on your side. Be honest and be thorough. The things you play down are often the things that matter.

> **It is free, start to finish.** If anyone asks for a fee to file your claim, walk away.

What to bring

- [ ] Your DD-214, Member Copy 4 (see Part 2)
- [ ] Your checked list from Part 1
- [ ] Any medical records you have, from the VA or from other doctors
- [ ] A list of the medicines you take now
- [ ] A photo ID
- [ ] Marriage and dependent information, if it applies to you
- [ ] Any VA letters or claim numbers you already have

What to expect

- **You do the talking. They do the paperwork.**
- **They may enroll you in VA health care** at the same time.
- **Filing is the start, not the finish.** Your VSO stays your representative the whole way.
- **You can bring someone.** A spouse or a friend is welcome. You do not have to do this alone.

Good questions to ask

- [ ] Am I enrolled in VA health care? If not, can you help me enroll?
- [ ] Based on what I have told you, what might I be eligible for?
- [ ] How long does this usually take? What happens after we file?
- [ ] Will you represent me through the entire claim?
- [ ] Should we send in an intent to file? It may let benefits start from an earlier date, if the claim is filed within a year.

PART 4

After You File

The claim is in. Now it takes time. The wait is normal. Here is how to check on it and what to watch for.

How to check on your claim

- **By phone.** Call the VA benefits hotline at **800-827-1000**, Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Eastern. Have your Social Security number or VA file number ready.
- **Through your VSO.** Your representative can see details you cannot. If something looks stuck, ask them to check.
- **Online.** Sign in at **va.gov/claim-or-appeal-status**.

While you wait

- **Go to your C&P exam.** That is a Compensation and Pension exam. The VA may schedule one. If you cannot make the date, call **800-827-1000** right away to reschedule. A missed exam is a common reason a claim stalls.
- **Keep your address and phone number current with the VA.** That is how they reach you.
- **Keep going to your doctor.** Ongoing care keeps your records up to date.
- **Watch your mail for the decision letter.**

> **Watch out for scams.** We will never ask for your bank account or Social Security number. We will never ask for your VA password either. If anyone calls you asking for these, hang up. Then call the VA yourself at **800-827-1000**.

If you disagree with the decision

A decision is not the end of the road. You generally have one year from the date on the letter to ask the VA to look again. Bring the letter to your VSO and let them handle the next move. We do not advise on that part, but we will help you get back in touch with the people who do.

Numbers worth keeping

Keep this page by your phone.

Worth Their Weight Call or text. Free.	**833-989-8387**
VA benefits hotline, claim status Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. Eastern. TTY: 711	**800-827-1000**
MyVA411, any VA question Open 24 hours, every day	**800-698-2411**
VA caregiver support line For family caring for a veteran	**855-260-3274**
Vet Center, free counseling Open 24 hours, every day	**877-927-8387**
Veterans Crisis Line Open 24 hours, every day	**Dial 988, then press 1**

My VSO

Fill this in at your first meeting.

My VSO representative's name _____

Their phone number _____

Date we filed _____

Not sure where to start? Start with us.

We help you get ready, connect you to an accredited VSO, and stay with you after. It never costs you anything.

833-989-8387

833-WTW-VETS · call or text

Steps and VA video

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