



# A Guide to Veteran Service Officers

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# Introduction

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) delivers a wide array of benefits and services to eligible veterans, dependents and survivors to help to ease the transition from the military to civilian life and to improve quality of life.

However, a recent VA survey <sup>1</sup> found that nationwide, fewer than half of veterans indicated that they understood their general benefits, and as the benefits became more specific, the awareness level generally dropped (e.g., 7.3 percent were aware of cash plot allowances, and 10.6 percent were aware of cash burial allowances). Another VA survey <sup>2</sup> found only 44 percent (9.6 out of 21.7 million) of all veterans used at least one VA benefit or service in fiscal year 2015.

This is where a veteran service officer (VSO) comes in. VSOs are individuals who know their way around the VA system and can assist veterans and their families in a number of ways. If you need assistance in getting the benefits you or a family member is due as a veteran or an eligible dependent, VSOs can help with everything from answering questions about what benefits are available from federal, state, county and local resources to assisting eligible veterans and their family members fill out the necessary claims to representing individuals in VA hearings.

Navigating benefits can be overwhelming for veterans and their families — but it doesn't have to be. This book will provide a guide to who veteran service officers are, how they can help you get the benefits you deserve and how to find a service officer near you.

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## CHAPTER 1

# Who Are Veteran Service Officers

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Veteran service officers (VSOs) are individuals trained and accredited by the VA or other recognized organizations to provide assistance to veterans, their dependents and survivors.

## The Accreditation Process

VSOs have undergone a formal application and training process and are recognized by VA as being capable of assisting claimants with their affairs before VA. Most accredited representatives work for veteran service organizations, many of which are private nonprofit groups that advocate on behalf of veterans, service members, dependents and survivors. Accredited representatives may also work for state or county government entities.



The accreditation process includes an examination, a background investigation and continuing education requirements to ensure VSOs are providing the most up-to-date information. Recognized organizations and individuals, whether congressionally chartered VSOs or VA-accredited claims agents or attorneys, can legally represent a veteran, service member, dependent or survivor before VA. Non-recognized organizations and individuals can provide information but cannot

be a representative.

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## The Role of a Veteran Service Officer

State, county and other local veteran service officers are trained to help you understand and apply for any VA benefits you may be entitled to including compensation, education, vocational rehabilitation and employment, home loans, life insurance, pension, health care, and burial benefits. Additionally, your VSO can help you gather any evidence needed and submit a Fully Developed Claim on your behalf. Many VSOs provide their services free-of-charge, but they may request reimbursement for unusual expenses.

The VA Office of General Counsel maintains a list of VA-recognized organizations and VA-accredited individuals that are authorized to assist in the preparation, presentation and prosecution of VA benefits claims. For more information on how to select a representative, find out who can charge fees relating to representation, file a complaint about your representative, or to dispute a charge by an agent or attorney based on reasonableness, please visit [va.gov/ogc/accreditation.asp](https://va.gov/ogc/accreditation.asp) .



## CHAPTER 2

# Benefits of Working with a Veteran Service Officer

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If you are a service member, veteran or family member who finds the prospect of needing to submit a benefits claim with VA daunting, the VA understands. The VA fully supports veterans and their families and wants to ensure you get access to the benefits you deserve as quickly and efficiently as possible.

One of the best ways to help you receive your benefits is to work with an accredited veteran service officer (VSO). A VSO is available to assist you with understanding the benefits you may be eligible for and the claims submission process. VSOs understand issues veterans face. They are knowledgeable of laws passed by Congress that affect service members, veterans and their families. They act as guides to better understand and navigate through the rules, regulations and processes put into place by VA. They act as liaisons when you need care or service from VA medical facilities or regional offices. Best of all, they offer their services at no cost to you.

## A VSO as a Power of Attorney

A VSO is an official representative who can help you through the claim process by acting as your power of attorney (POA). Acting as a POA will allow an appointed VSO to initiate your claim to preserve an effective start date, gather required records and evidence on your behalf, and

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## CHAPTER 2: BENEFITS OF WORKING WITH A VETERAN SERVICE OFFICER

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review your application prior to submission. This allows the VSO to check for any missing evidence or information to ensure that your claim is complete.

A VSO serving as your POA is also given 48 hours to review your VA decision to ensure it is correct before it is sent to you. VSOs can be particularly helpful for veterans and dependents who want to file a Fully Developed Claim.

### **The Fully Developed Claim Program**

The Fully Developed Claim (FDC) program offers veterans and survivors faster decisions from VA on compensation, pension and surviving dependent benefits claims. When you complete an FDC, you simply submit all relevant records in your possession including those records which are easily obtainable, such as private medical records, at the time you make your claim and certify that you have no further evidence to submit. You must submit all evidence you want considered for the claim, except for federal records and records in VA's possessions.

If you already have a copy of federal records, including active duty service treatment records, you should submit them with your claim. You are not required to obtain these records if they are not already in your possession; VA will help gather these records for you.

When you submit all your information at the same time, VA can then review and process your claim quickly.

### **Working With a VSO to Submit an FDC**

If you choose to file an FDC online through eBenefits, you have the option to choose a VSO when you begin the application process. This person will be an advocate on your behalf throughout the claims process. Using a VSO is the best way to ensure all required evidence is submitted correctly so that you can receive a faster claims decision from the VA.



## CHAPTER 3

# How to Find a Veteran Service Officer

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**Y**ou may think that veteran service officers (VSOs) are only available through organizations such as the American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars, but many state, county and local governments have trained VSOs in their veterans departments who can help. Local VSOs can be found in offices specific to each state, your county courthouse, your local VA office or the local organization's headquarters.

Visit [va.gov/vso](https://va.gov/vso)  to get detailed information about various service officers. The website contains a list of both VA-recognized and non-recognized VSOs. A recognized VSO can legally represent a veteran before VA, while a non-recognized VSO can provide information but cannot be a representation before VA. Call VA at 1-800-827-1000. The VA will know if an organization is accredited and has an office in the nearest VA regional office.

## Organizations with Veteran Service Officers Nationwide

You do not have to be a member of these organization to use their services.

### AMERICAN LEGION

The American Legion was chartered and incorporated by Congress in 1919 as a patriotic veterans organization devoted to mutual helpfulness. Accredited American Legion service officers are specially trained to provide expert assistance, free of charge, to veterans and their families. Although the majority

of a service officer's work involves **CONTINUED** »

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## CHAPTER 3: HOW TO FIND A VETERAN SERVICE OFFICER

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application for VA disability benefits, these professionals also provide information, referrals and resources on education, employment and business, death benefits, and other important topics. [Find a service officer near you](#) .

### AMVETS

AMVETS National Service Foundation has a nationwide cadre of national service officers stationed at Department of Veterans Affairs regional offices and medical centers. Accredited by the Department of Veterans Affairs, these AMVETS national service officers are trained in all aspects of veterans' benefits, keeping abreast of changes in VA regulations, policies, procedures and entitlements. [Click here](#)  to



view contact information for a national service office near you.

### DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS

Disabled American Veterans (DAV) is a nonprofit that provides support for veterans of all generations and their families. A local DAV national service officer (NSO) will help you file a claim and stick with you all through the process. All services provided by DAV NSOs are free of charge. [Find a national service officer near you](#) .

### MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART

The Military Order of the Purple Heart was formed in 1932 for the protection and mutual interest of all who have received the Purple Heart decoration. Composed exclusively of Purple Heart recipients, it is the only veterans service organization comprised strictly

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## CHAPTER 3: HOW TO FIND A VETERAN SERVICE OFFICER

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of combat veterans. The Military Order of the Purple Heart Service Program exists to assist all veterans in working with the VA and filing claims for the many benefits that are available. You do not need to be a member of the organization to seek assistance. [Find a national service officer near you](#) .

### PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

Since 1946, Paralyzed Veterans of America has been a leading advocate for quality health care, spinal cord research and education, veterans benefits, and civil rights for veterans and all people with disabilities. [Find a national service officer near you](#) .



### VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States is a nonprofit veterans service organization comprised of eligible veterans and military service members from the active, Guard and reserve forces. The National Veterans Service (NVS) was established to help all veterans, service members and their families. NVS consists of a nationwide network of VA-accredited service officers and pre-discharge representatives who are experts in dealing with the VA. [Find a service officer near you](#) .

### VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA

Vietnam Veterans of America is the only congressionally chartered national veterans service organization dedicated to serving veterans of the Vietnam War and their families. Its members served in the American military during the two decades of the Vietnam era, 1961–1975. [Find a service officer near you](#) .

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## State and County Veteran Service Officers

Every state provides veteran service officers. They will help with VA claims, and they can help you identify benefits available from your state government. Those state benefits can be reduced property taxes, educational benefits and more. Click on your state below to locate a state or county veteran service officer near you.

[Alabama](#)[Louisiana](#)[Ohio](#)[Alaska](#)[Maine](#)[Oklahoma](#)[Arizona](#)[Maryland](#)[Oregon](#)[Arkansas](#)[Massachusetts](#)[Pennsylvania](#)[California](#)[Michigan](#)[Rhode Island](#)[Colorado](#)[Minnesota](#)[South Carolina](#)[Connecticut](#)[Mississippi](#)[South Dakota](#)[Delaware](#)[Missouri](#)[Tennessee](#)[Florida](#)[Montana](#)[Texas](#)[Georgia](#)[Nebraska](#)[Utah](#)[Hawaii](#)[Nevada](#)[Vermont](#)[Idaho](#)[New Hampshire](#)[Virginia](#)[Illinois](#)[New Jersey](#)[Washington](#)[Indiana](#)[New Mexico](#)[West Virginia](#)[Iowa](#)[New York](#)[Wisconsin](#)[Kansas](#)[North Carolina](#)[Wyoming](#)[Kentucky](#)[North Dakota](#)

## CHAPTER 4

# How to Appoint a Veteran Service Officer

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**R**emember, merely selecting a veteran service officer (VSO) is not the same as working closely with one. You should be sure to work with the VSO you selected throughout the claim submission process.

## Online

You may appoint a VSO to represent you or manage your current representative online using [eBenefits](#).

## At Your Nearest VA Regional Office

The VSO or VA will provide [VA Form 21-22](#), "Appointment of Veterans Service Organization as Claimant's Representative," for you to fill out. Be sure to talk to your chosen service officer before submitting this appointment to VA to make sure both you and your VSO are comfortable with the arrangement.

VA strongly encourages using a VSO throughout the claims process to ensure your application is properly submitted so you can receive the quickest decision on your claim. An accredited VSO provides free, expert advice and can ensure your Fully Developed Claim is complete when submitted, getting you the benefits you deserve faster.



## About BlueStar Caregivers

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BlueStar SeniorTech is a service-disabled veteran-owned small business dedicated to improving the quality of care and life of veterans and seniors everywhere. Offering medical, emergency and health alert systems and senior care products, BlueStar helps make independent living safe and enjoyable while delivering peace of mind to seniors and their loved ones.

BlueStar supports caregivers through our non-profit site ([www.BlueStarCaregivers.org](http://www.BlueStarCaregivers.org)). We support deserving senior veterans and their spouses through our 501(c)(3) charitable foundation, the Blue Star Senior Veterans Foundation ([www.BlueStarSeniorVeterans.org](http://www.BlueStarSeniorVeterans.org)).

BlueStar was founded by, and is operated by, veterans and their families. Our CEO and COO are retired two-star Navy admirals. We have 14 admirals and generals on our advisory board. We are dedicated to helping American seniors be Safe, Healthy, and Connected as they age. For more information, visit [www.BlueStarSeniorTech.com](http://www.BlueStarSeniorTech.com).