



DETACHMENT SERVICE OFFICER GUIDEBOOK

Published 5 June 2024

INTRODUCTION

The Marine Corps League (MCL) Detachment Service Officer (DSO) is a volunteer position within an individual detachment. A DSO is a local advocate who serves as a conduit between the veteran or the veteran's family member(s) and a representative holding MCL accreditation. An effective DSO understands the benefits afforded to veterans and their family members; however, the DSO is not authorized to file any claims on behalf of the claimant. DSOs serve as valuable resources to MCL members in local detachments to ensure the members are informed about their earned benefits. DSOs should know how to access Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) forms and assist claimants in applying for benefits and should develop relationships with the VA nationally accredited service officers in their regions.

The purpose of this guidebook is to assist members serving as a DSO.

SERVICE OFFICERS AND THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES

National Director of Veterans Service (NDVS) is employed by the National Office of the MCL. The NDVS prescribes training, practices, and instructions for DSOs and National Veteran Service Officers within the MCL. The NDVS is the certifying official of VA Form 21, Application for Accreditation as Service Organization Representatives submitted by individuals applying for accreditation with the MCL.

National Accredited Veterans Service Officers (VSOs) are accredited representatives of the VA. VSOs function as attorneys-in-fact for veterans and their families in the pursuit of compensation, pension, and other benefits before the VA and other government entities. VSOs have a detailed knowledge of the laws and regulations pertaining to veterans benefits and a sufficient understanding of medical terminology, anatomy, and physiology. VSOs represent claimants in the preparation and prosecution of claims for veterans' benefits.

Detachment Service Officers (DSOs) provide one of the most important links in the organization. DSOs provide information about benefits and can gather information to assist veterans, their dependents, and survivors in obtaining benefits and services available to them. DSOs advise, instruct, and counsel claimants and aid in the preparation of claims for various benefits to which claimants may be entitled. DSOs do not hold legal standing to represent claimants before the VA. When an inquiry is taken or after an appropriate form is properly completed, such information must immediately be forwarded to the VSO of jurisdiction. DSOs are also encouraged to compile and submit an annual report of contact to the NDVS during May.

County Veteran Service Officers (CVSOs) assist veterans, their dependents, and survivors by counseling, advising, and providing information about benefits and services available by county, state, and federal laws. Although there are many CVSOs across the nation, some, like those in the state of Ohio, are accredited with the MCL to work in partnership in the preparation and presentation of claims. These CVSOs undergo annual training to maintain MCL accreditation and are very knowledgeable in the law pertaining to veterans' benefits. CVSOs present all claims and appeals directly to the

VA to maintain the earliest effective date possible for clientele. This includes, but is not limited to, ensuring the intent to file for all claimants who have interest in seeking any benefit is presented expeditiously to the VA, ensuring claims are formalized within one year of an intent to file, and presenting any appeals within one year of the claimant's notification from VA.

POINTS OF CONTACT

Each DSO should have readily available the contact information for various resources in their local area that could be beneficial to veterans and their dependents. These resources can include, but are not limited to:

- MCL DSOs and VSOs
- CVSOs or state Veterans Service Officers with MCL accreditation or cross-accreditation
- Agencies for senior citizens
- State and local nursing homes
- Homeless shelters
- State and national cemeteries
- Mailing lists for county and state veterans job fairs
- Veterans outreach programs and educational programs
- VA contact information, including phone numbers and website addresses

Depending on the location, state and municipal governments may provide benefits to disabled veterans; DSOs should contact VSOs and/or local accredited representatives to gather information that could be provided through state government programs. A list of VA phone numbers and websites are provided at end of this guidebook.

SERVICE-CONNECTED DISABILITY COMPENSATION

The VA disability benefits program was established to provide tax-free compensation for veterans suffering from any injury or disease that is caused by or aggravated by military service, or treatment of service-connected disabilities. Veterans with active duty and active duty training are eligible for service-connection injuries or diseases incurred in the line of duty. Veterans on inactive duty for training only may qualify for injuries sustained while actively training. Compensation is based on the degree of severity of the disability, i.e., the veteran's disability rating, which ranges from 0% to 100%.

Note: National Guard and Reserve must obtain and submit their own claims.

To determine eligibility for service-connected disability, the veteran's service must have been terminated by discharge or separation under conditions other than dishonorable. There is no time-of-service requirement for filing for service-connection, the only requirement is that of character of service.

Direct service connection may be granted on a direct basis for a current medical residual of a condition that was treated, manifested, or incurred as the result of active

military service. There are three elements that a veteran must have in order to be granted service connection for a condition. They must have:

- An in-service disability, injury, or incident,
- A current disability, and
- A medical link between the current disability and the in-service event, injury, or illness.

Example: A veteran sustained a right-knee meniscus tear while serving on active duty in 2012. In 2022, the veteran was discharged from service and sought treatment from a civilian doctor. The civilian doctor provided a medical opinion stating the right knee condition is related to the in-service right knee meniscus tear. The doctor provided rationale stating that, due to the years of continuous strain on the right knee, permanent damage has been done.

Regulation does not require veterans to demonstrate that they were diagnosed with a disability or disease while in the military, but rather that any current disability or disease arose as the result of their military service. If the application is filed more than one year following separation, the VA may require evidence supporting continuity of the disability from date of discharge.

Aggravated service connection is a disease or injury that existed before military service and was made worse beyond its natural or normal progression by military service. For service connection to be granted based on aggravation, there must be:

- A current disability.
- Medical evidence or in certain circumstances, lay evidence of an in-service incurrence.
- A medical link explaining that the pre-service disability was aggravated by the veteran's active military service beyond its natural progression.

The most important aspect of filing a claim based on aggravation is that the VA must determine if the in-service injury was aggravated beyond its natural progression. Just because an injury worsens during active military service does not mean the aggravation was beyond what would reasonably be expected had the veteran not entered into active duty. For this reason, the MCL recommends these claims be supported by a medical opinion.

Example: A veteran sustained a right-knee injury while playing football in high school. The injury healed, and the veteran was cleared for entry into the military. While on active duty, the veteran sustained a right-knee meniscus tear. After release from active duty, the veteran files a claim for service connection of the right knee. The medical examiner assigned to review the claim states the meniscus tear is an aggravation beyond the natural progression of the expectations of the preservice knee condition.

Secondary service connection is due to or the result of a service-connected condition. When service connection is established for a secondary condition, the secondary

condition is considered a part of the original condition.

Generally, any increase in severity of a non-service-connected condition due to or the result of a service-connected disease or injury, and not due to the natural progress of the non-service-connected disease, will be service connected. For service connection to be granted based on secondary basis, there must be:

- A current service-connected disability.
- Medical evidence of a separate disability not already service connected.
- A medical link between the established service-connected disability and the claimed disability.

Example: A veteran is service connected for multiple sclerosis. Because of this condition, the veteran also suffers from depression. The medical examiner assigned to review the claim states the depression is caused by the multiple sclerosis.

Presumptive service connection can be granted for certain veterans with disabilities due to the unique circumstances of their military service. If one of the recognized conditions is diagnosed for a veteran, the VA will automatically assume that the condition was caused by military service. If a veteran meets the eligibility criteria and is claiming service connection for one of the identified conditions, the veteran does not have to submit a medical opinion providing a nexus linking the disability to military service.

Example: Veterans living or working at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C., in the 1950s to 1980s were exposed to contaminated drinking water. During this period, those living on the base not only unknowingly consumed contaminated water but also cooked, bathed, and washed their clothes with it. As a result, veterans and their family members became sick and developed health problems.

Example: Veterans deployed to Iraq when the military, or its contractors, burned waste and garbage by open-air combustion. As the garbage and waste burned, it created large plumes of smoke and other emissions that were inhaled by service members in the surrounding area up to several miles. A veteran was exposed to this smoke has developed short- or long-term health effects.

Note: A veteran claiming a disability for service connection that does not meet the eligibility requirements for exposure should pursue the direct method. Eligibility criteria for presumptive service connection are subject to the rebuttable presumption provisions of [Title 38 U.S.C. § 3.307\(d\)](#).

Condition caused by VA treatment, also known as 1151 compensation, is a non-service-connected injury or death directly incurred while getting VA medical care or participating in a VA employment program. To obtain compensation, a veteran must be able to show that the condition would not have occurred but for the accident or fault on the part of the VA. In general, to establish service connection due to VA hospitalization or treatment, evidence must show the condition is not the result of the veteran not

following medical instruction.

Additionally, evidence must support that the condition is not the result of its continuance or natural progression, unless the VA failed to timely diagnose or properly treat the disease or injury that resulted in its continuance or natural progression.

Important: When a condition resulted from VA medical care, VA training or rehabilitation services, or compensated work therapy programs, the veteran must obtain a medical opinion from a qualified health professional. The health professional should review the veteran's medical record and make an independent assessment of whether the disability or injury was the result.

The disability claims process can be complicated. Veterans and their dependents contacting DSOs should be referred to the nationally or locally accredited representatives for assistance when pursuing their disability benefits. A DSO, however, is a vital first contact for veterans. A word of caution: Never predict or suggest that a claimant has a successful case or that their case is not worth pursuing.

PENSION BENEFITS

A VA pension is a tax-free benefit provided for wartime veterans and their surviving spouses with annual earnings below an income threshold. The benefit is provided to individuals suffering financial hardship with low net worth. To be eligible for the Veterans Pension program, the veteran must meet the following three criteria:

Both of these must be true:

- Didn't receive a dishonorable discharge, and
- Yearly family income and net worth meet the limits set by Congress.

And at least one of these must be true about the veteran's service:

- Started on active duty before September 8, 1980, and served at least 90 days on active duty with at least one day during a wartime period, or
- Started on active duty as an enlisted person after September 7, 1980, and served at least 24 months or the full period for which they were called or ordered to active duty (with some exceptions) with at least one day during a wartime period, or
- Started on active duty as an officer after October 16, 1981, and had not previously served on active duty for at least 24 months.

And at least one of these must be true:

- Age 65 or older,
- Totally and permanently disabled,
- A patient in a nursing home for long-term care because of a disability, or
- Receiving Social Security Disability Insurance or Supplemental Security Income.

SURVIVERS PENSION

Spouses of deceased veterans may also be entitled to VA compensation through Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC). To qualify for DIC benefits, the surviving spouse must meet specific criteria. The surviving spouse is not remarried and was either:

- Married to a servicemember who died on active duty, active duty for training or inactive duty training,
- Married the deceased veteran before January 1, 1957,
- Married to a veteran who died from a service-connected injury or disease, within 15 years of discharge,
- Married to the deceased veteran for at least one year,
- Had a child with the veteran and cohabited with the veteran continuously until the veteran's death or, if separated, was not at fault for the separation.

Note: A surviving spouse who remarries on or after December 16, 2003, and on or after attaining age 57, is entitled to continue to receive DIC.

Surviving spouses may also be qualified for pension. Similar to pension benefits for veterans, surviving spouse pension is income based and is related to the deceased veteran's service. Qualifications for pensions for surviving spouses are:

The deceased veteran must have met the following service requirements:

- For service on or before September 7, 1980, the veteran must have served at least 90 days of active military service, with at least one day during a war-time period.
- If the veterans entered active duty after September 7, 1980, generally they must have served at least 24 months or the full period for which they were called or ordered to active duty, with at least one day during a war time period.
- Was discharged from service under other than dishonorable conditions.

Survivors Pension is also based on yearly family income, which must be less than the amount set by Congress to qualify. While a non-remarried spouse is eligible at any age, a child of a deceased wartime veteran must be either:

- Under age 18,
- Under age 23 if attending a VA-approved school, or
- Permanently incapable of self-support due to a disability before age 18.

BURIAL BENEFITS

Burial benefits available include a gravesite in any of the VA national cemeteries with available space, opening and closing of the grave, perpetual care, a government headstone, marker, or medallion, a burial flag, and a Presidential Memorial Certificate, at no cost to the family. Some veterans may also be eligible for burial allowances.

Cremated remains are buried or interred in national cemeteries in the same manner and with the same honors as casketed remains.

Burial benefits available for spouses and dependents buried in a national cemetery include burial with the Veteran, perpetual care, and the spouse or dependents name and date of birth and death will be inscribed on the Veteran's headstone, at no cost to the family. Eligible spouses and dependents may be buried, even if they predecease the veteran.

The deceased veteran's family should make funeral or cremation arrangements with a funeral provider or cremation office. Any item or service obtained from a funeral home or cremation office will be at the family's expense.

A veteran can apply to find out in advance if they can be buried in a VA national cemetery. This is called a pre-need determination of eligibility—and it can help make the burial planning process easier for the veteran's family members in their time of need.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE VSO

Veterans' claims are adjudicated at a VA regional office (VARO) located throughout the country. The MCL is endeavoring to place at least one VSO in each MCL Division and dedicated to effectively advocating for veterans and their family members. To provide greater assistance to veterans, the DSO should develop a strong working relationship with the VSOs in their region to ensure the highest quality service. Though DSOs cannot discuss specifics regarding each veteran's claim, the DSO can provide the following information that will be helpful to the veteran and allow the VSO to provide a higher level of assistance:

- Receive information pertinent to the claim (forms, letters, etc.).
- Remind the veteran of upcoming appointments.
- Provide or locate transportation for veterans requiring services.

DSOs should maintain a record of veterans seeking their assistance to track the services provided. Gathering this information can be of assistance to each Department and MCL National Headquarters. Although the MCL does not require membership to assist veterans, we encourage DSOs to have membership information, like the QR code below, available to inquiring veterans. Many veterans, including Marine Corps veterans, are unaware of the programs and services the MCL provides. When working with DSOs, undoubtedly some will ask questions about membership.



DSO DOS AND DON'TS

DO

- Keep the confidence of all claimants.
- Always listen to the claimant, and record information correctly.
- Maintain high professional standards in dealings with veterans or other claimants, other service officers, and all individuals with whom they have contact. Treat everyone with respect and courtesy.
- Become familiar with VA forms to provide information and technical assistance to claimants seeking your help.
- Promptly refer claimants seeking representation to an appropriate nationally accredited representative.
- Expeditiously forward all correspondence, applications, evidence, etc., in connection with the claim. All material submitted in relationship to a claim must be forwarded to the accredited representative or returned to the claimant.
- Provide services to any claimant regardless of race, age, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, or branch of service.
- When in doubt, contact a VSO or the NDVS.

DON'T

- Don't maintain files on claimants except for a redacted file copy of the Report of Contact.
- Don't attempt to complete any VA forms that are unfamiliar.
- Don't directly contact the VA concerning a claim or other matter, and don't submit any claimant correspondence directly to the VA.
- Don't counsel a claimant on their individual claim and do not offer any guidance or opinion as to the nature or merits of the claim itself. Never tell a claimant that their claim is a "sure thing" or that it is "unwinnable."
- When assisting a claimant complete a form, don't make suggestions on how to frame information to make it appear more favorable or less harmful.
- When assisting the claimant gather evidence for their accredited representative, never make a judgment as to the relevance of a piece of evidence. If a claimant wishes to submit something to the VA, it should be submitted.
- Never request, demand, or accept any kind of payment for assisting a claimant. If a grateful claimant tries to compensate you, tell them it is a violation of federal law to give, or for a DSO, to receive any compensation.

STANDARDIZED VA FORMS FOR BENEFITS

A specific claim in the form prescribed by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs must be filed for benefits to be paid to any individual under the laws administered by the VA.

Always use the VA Forms website, www.va.gov/vaforms/default.asp, to ensure you have the most recent version of the form.

General

- VA Form 21-22, Appointment of Veterans Service Organization as Claimant's Representative
- VA Form 21-0966, Intent to File a Claim for Compensation and/or Pension, or Survivors Pension and/or DIC
- VA Form 21-4142, Authorization to Disclose Information to the Department of Veterans Affairs
- VA Form 21-0845, Authorization to Disclose Personal Information to a Third Party
- VA Form 21-0972, Alternate Signer Certification
- VA Form 21-2680, Examination for Housebound Status or Permanent Need for Regular Aid and Attend
- VA Form 21-4138, Statement in Support of Claim
- VA Form 5655, Financial Status Report
- VA Form 20-10206, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) or Privacy Act (PA) Request
- VA Form 20-10207, Priority Processing Request
- VA Form 21-10210, Lay/Witness Statement
- VA Form 21-0538, Mandatory Verification of Dependents

Compensation

- VA Form 21-526EZ, Application for Disability Compensation and Related Compensation Benefits (only for new claims)
- VA Form 20-0995, Decision Review Request: Supplemental Claim (only for previously denied issues)
- VA Form 21-0781, Statement in Support of Claim for Service Connection for PTSD
- VA Form 21-0781a, Statement in Support of Claim for Service Connection for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Secondary to Personal Assault
- VA Form 21-4502, Application for Automobile or Other Conveyance and Adaptive Equipment
- VA Form 10-1394, Application for Adaptive Equipment Motor Vehicle
- VA Form 26-4555, Application in Acquiring Specially Adapted Housing or Special Home Adaptation Grant
- VA Form 10-8678, Application for Annual Clothing Allowance
- VA Form 21-686c, Application Request to Add and/or Remove Dependents
- VA Form 21-674, Request for Approval of School Attendance
- VA Form 21P-509, Statement of Dependency of Parents
- VA Form 21-8940, Veteran's Application for Increased Compensation Based on Unemployability
- VA Form 21-4192, Request for Employment Information in Connection with Claim for Disability Benefits

Pension and Survivor Benefits

- VA Form 21P-527EZ, Application for Pension
- VA Form 21P-534EZ, Application for DIC, Survivors Pension, and/or Accrued Benefits
- VA Form 21P-535, Application for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation by Parent(s) (Including Accrued Benefits and Death Compensation When Applicable)
- VA Form 21P-601, Application for Accrued Amounts Due a Deceased Beneficiary
- VA Form 21P-530, Application for Burial Benefits VA Form 27-2008: Application for United States Flag for Burial Purposes
- VA Form 40-1330, Application for Standard Government Headstone or Marker
- VA Form 40-10007, Application for Pre-Need Determination of Eligibility for Burial in a VA National Cemetery
- VA Form 40-0247, Presidential Memorial Certificate Request Form
- VA Form 21-0779, Request for Nursing Home Information in Connection with Claim for Aid and Attendance
- VA Form 21P-8416, Medical Expense Report

Decision Review

- VA Form 20-0995, Decision Review Request: Supplemental Claim
- VA Form 20-0996, Decision Review Request: Higher Level Review
- VA Form 10182, Decision Review Request: Board Appeal

Education and Employment

- VA Form 28-1900, Application for Vocational Rehabilitation for Claimants With Service Connected Disabilities
- VA Form 22-1990, Application for VA Education Benefits
- VA Form 22-1990e, Application for Family Member to Use Transferred Benefits
- VA Form 22-1990t, Application for Individualized Tutorial Assistance
- VA Form 22-5490, Dependents' Application for VA Education Benefits (Under Provisions of Chapters 33 and 35 of Title 38, U.S.C.)

VA Insurance and Home Loan

- VA Form 29-4364, Application for Service-Disabled Veterans Insurance
- VA Form 29-357, Claim for Disability Insurance – Government Life Insurance
- VA Form 29-0188, Application for Supplemental Service-Disabled Veterans Insurance
- VA Form 29-8636, Veterans Mortgage Life Insurance Statement
- VA Form 26-1880, Request for a Certificate of Eligibility
- VA Form 26-1817, Request for Determination of Loan Guaranty – Unmarried Surviving Spouses

VA Health Care

- VA Form 10-10EZ, Instructions for Completing Enrollment Application for Health Benefits
- VA Form 10-10d, Application for CHAMPVA Benefits
- VA Form 10-7959C, CHAMPVA – Other Health Insurance

VA PHONE NUMBERS

Phone Numbers Veterans Crisis Line	Dial 988, then Press 1
VA Hotline	800-MyVA411 (800-698-2411, option 9)
MyVA411.....	800-698-2411
Bereavement Counseling (through Vet Centers)	877-927-8387
Camp Lejeune Family Member Program	866-372-1144
Civilian Health and Medical Program (CHAMPVA)	800-733-8387
Community Care Billing Questions	877-881-7618
Debt Management Center	800-827-0648
Education	888-442-4551
Foreign Medical Program	877-345-8179 or 303-331-7590
Headstones and Markers	800-697-6947
Health Care	877-222-8387
Homeless Veterans	877-424-3838
Home Loans	877-827-3702
Life Insurance, All Programs Other than SGLI, FSGLI, TSGLI, VGLI	800-669-8477
Life Insurance, Veterans' Group Life Insurance Program (VGLI), Claims for Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance (SGLI) and Family SGLI	800-419-1473
National Cemetery Scheduling Office	800-535-1117
Native American Direct Home Loans	888-349-7541
Presidential Memorial Certificate Program	202-565-4964
Spina Bifida Program	888-820-1756
TTY, Federal Relay	711
VA Benefits	800-827-1000
Vet Center Call Center	877-927-8387
Women Veterans	877-222-8387
72-Hour Emergency Care Notification Line	844-724-7842

VA WEBSITES

VA Home Page	https://www.va.gov/
Benefits and Services Overview	https://www.choose.va.gov/
Burial and Memorial Benefits	https://www.cem.va.gov
Caregiver Support	https://www.caregiver.va.gov
CHAMPVA	https://www.va.gov/communitycare/programs/dependents/champva/
Community Care	https://www.va.gov/communitycare/
Dental Care	https://www.va.gov/dental/
Disability Claims and Appeals	https://www.va.gov/claim-or-appeal-status/

Education Benefits.....	https://www.va.gov/education/
Environmental Exposures	https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/
Federal Recovery Consultant Office	https://www.va.gov/vadodhealth/frcp.asp
Geriatrics and Extended Care	https://www.va.gov/geriatrics/
Health Care Eligibility	https://www.va.gov/health-care/
Homeless Veterans	https://www.va.gov/homeless/
Home Loan Guaranty.....	https://www.benefits.va.gov/homeloans/
Life Insurance	https://www.benefits.va.gov/insurance/
Memorial Certificate Program	https://www.cem.va.gov/facts/Presidential_Memorial_Certificates.asp
Mental Health	https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov
My HealtheVet	https://www.myhealth.va.gov/mhv-portal-web/home
National Resource Directory	https://www.nrd.gov
PACT Act	https://www.va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits/
Post 9/11 Veterans	https://www.va.gov/post911veterans/
Returning Service Members	https://www.va.gov/post911veterans/
Service Records ..	https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/military-personnel
State Departments of Veterans Affairs	https://department.va.gov/about/state-departments-of-veterans-affairs-office-locations/
Welcome Kit	https://www.va.gov/welcome-kit/
Women Veterans	https://www.womenshealth.va.gov
	https://www.benefits.va.gov/persona/veteran-women.asp
	https://www.va.gov/womenvet
VA Forms	https://www.va.gov/find-forms/
VA Solid Start	https://www.benefits.va.gov/transition/solid-start.asp
VA Vet Centers	https://www.benefits.va.gov/transition/solid-start.asp
Veteran Readiness and Employment	https://www.va.gov/careers-employment/vocational-rehabilitation/
Veterans Crisis Line	https://www.veteranscrisisline.net
72-Hour Emergency Care Notification Portal	https://emergencycarereporting.communitycare.va.gov/#/request

SUMMARY

The National Board of Trustees, National Staff, and Department leadership appreciate the dedication of DSOs and their willingness to assist veterans, their dependents, and survivors. It is through the dedication of volunteers like you that we can assist the thousands of members that make up the Marine Corps League and the 18 million veterans and their families nationwide. Again, thank you for continuing to serve the MCL. It is the service that you provided in uniform and as a veteran that promotes the interest and preserves the traditions of the United States Marine Corps and fosters the ideals of Americanism and patriotic volunteerism. Semper Fidelis!