

VA Benefits and Claims Resources for Separating Personnel

Department of Veterans Affairs: VA has 56 Regional Offices throughout the country and has benefits counselors who are often able to answer questions regarding VA benefits on a walk-in basis. A list of VA's Regional Offices can be found on VA's website at <http://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/offices.asp>. Servicemembers can also contact VA toll-free by calling (800) 827-1000.

Federal Benefits for Veterans, Dependents, and Survivors: Each year, VA publishes a book that provides information about each of its benefits programs. An online edition of this publication can be found on VA's website at http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/benefits_book.asp.

Veterans Service Organizations: There are currently 36 Congressionally chartered and other Veterans Service Organizations that are recognized by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide "responsible, qualified representation in the preparation, presentation, and prosecution of claims" for Department of Veterans Affairs benefits. A complete listing of these organizations, along with contact information for each organization, is available in the Veterans Service Organization Directory that is published annually on VA's website at www.va.gov. Many of these Veterans Service Organizations have offices that are co-located at VA's Regional Offices throughout the country, and the VA-accredited representatives who staff these organizations are often able to provide assistance to claimants on a walk-in basis. These organizations do not charge VA benefits claimants any fees for the services that they provide. Many of these organizations will assist former servicemembers with OTH or BCD characterizations, as such a characterization may not preclude the former servicemember from eligibility for certain VA benefits.

Accredited Representatives: VA recognizes numerous individuals who are not employed by Veterans Service Organizations. These individuals, who are primarily attorneys, but may also be claims agents, are accredited by VA and are authorized to advise claimants as to eligibility requirements and to assist individuals in the filing of claims for VA benefits. These representatives are authorized, in certain circumstances, to charge fees for their services. However, due to federal law regarding fees they may collect, an attorney may not be able to represent you until you file a notice of disagreement with a VA rating decision. VA's Office of General Counsel maintains a list of accredited representatives, which can be found at <http://www.va.gov/ogc/accreditation/index/html>. Some attorneys, regardless of whether they are accredited to practice before VA, may be able to assist you if you are seeking a discharge upgrade.

Law School Clinics: A number of law schools throughout the country have clinics that provide free legal services to veterans and former servicemembers. Depending on the focus of each school's clinic, law students, under faculty mentorship, may be able to assist you with your claim for VA benefits. Some law school clinics also help former servicemembers who are seeking a discharge upgrade. A list of veterans law clinics can be found at <http://www.vetsprobono.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Law-Clinics1.pdf>. This list may not be comprehensive, and other law school clinics may be able to provide free services.