

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Adding or Removing a Dependent (VA Form 21-686c)

File a complete 21-686c to add or remove a dependent, with the right proof for each, and protect your effective date.



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A FWD Assist HQ Field Guide

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This guide is education, not representation. It explains how part of the VA system works so you can handle your own business with confidence. It is not legal or claims advice, and reading it does not create any representative relationship between you and the author. The author is not affiliated with the Department of Veterans Affairs, and nothing here is endorsed by the VA.

This guide prints no live VA dollar figures and no rating percentages on purpose, because they change. Before you make a decision based on any number, check the current figure at va.gov. No book can promise you an outcome; the evidence in your file and the law decide the result. Help from an accredited Veterans Service Officer is always free.

In crisis? Call the **Veterans Crisis Line**: dial **988**, then press **1**. You can also text **838255** or chat online at veteranscrisisline.net. It is free, confidential, and available 24/7.

Adding or Removing a Dependent (VA Form 21-686c)

File a complete 21-686c to add or remove a dependent, with the right proof for each, and protect your effective date.

This is general education, not legal or claims advice, and not guidance for your specific claim. It cannot promise you an amount or an outcome, and no one can. For help with your own claim, see a free accredited representative (see [the back of this guide](#)). Nothing here creates a representative relationship.

Current as of October 2026. Rules, forms, and figures change. Check current details at va.gov.

THE BEST WAY TO USE THIS GUIDE

The strongest position is to be your own informed advocate and to work with a free accredited representative. An accredited Veterans Service Organization, such as the DAV, VFW, American Legion, or a county or state veterans office, helps at no charge. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can help too. They can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision on your claim, and after that they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. This guide is here so you understand your own situation and can work with them as a full partner instead of handing it over blind. If you'd rather handle this yourself, and you're comfortable doing that, the guide walks you through every step. Either way, you stay in control.

The Outcome and What You Need Before You Start

The outcome: By the end of this guide you'll have filed a complete VA Form 21-686c to add or remove a dependent, with any proof VA needs for your situation, and your effective date protected.

This guide prepares you for the task. It doesn't and can't promise an amount, a back-pay figure, or an outcome. The rules and the evidence in your file decide the result.

WHAT YOU NEED BEFORE YOU START

- ☐ A VA.gov sign-in, or VA's phone number: 1-800-827-1000.
- ☐ The list of who VA already has on your award (Step 2 shows how to get it).
- ☐ For each dependent: full name, Social Security number, date of birth, and the date and place of the marriage, birth, or adoption.
- ☐ For a spouse: the dates and how any earlier marriage of either of you ended.
- ☐ For a child at least 18 and under 23 who's in school: a completed VA Form 21-674, Request for Approval of School Attendance.
- ☐ The name of a free accredited representative, or a plan to contact one.

When to start: The month the event happens (a marriage, a birth, an adoption, a divorce, a child leaving school) or the month you get a rating decision that first reaches the level for dependent pay. The effective-date rules in Step 5 reward filing quickly.

Start Here: The Basics

Extra compensation for dependents is separate from your disability rating. VA rates the disability; that's one job. VA adds money for dependents only once your combined service-connected rating reaches the level set in 38 U.S.C. 1115, and only for dependents it has on file. Reaching that level makes you eligible; it doesn't add your family on its own. The form that adds or removes a dependent is VA Form 21-686c, Application Request to Add and/or Remove Dependents. This guide walks both directions: adding anyone missing, and removing anyone who no longer qualifies, because being paid for a dependent who has come off builds a debt. Check the current threshold and amounts at va.gov.

The Steps

STEP 1

Confirm you meet the rating threshold.

Look at your latest rating decision for your combined rating, then check the threshold for dependent pay at va.gov or by calling 1-800-827-1000.

Where this is written down: 38 U.S.C. § 1115.

Done when you know whether you're at or above the threshold.

STEP 2

Confirm who VA lists as your dependents.

Sign in at va.gov/manage-dependents/view, or call 1-800-827-1000 and ask who's listed. Write it down, then list your actual household beside it.

If someone in your household is missing from VA's list, **then** add them. **If** VA's list shows someone who no longer qualifies, **then** remove them now, because that's a debt building.

Done when you have VA's list and your household list side by side.

STEP 3

Complete VA Form 21-686c.

Use VA Form 21-686c to add or remove a spouse, child, or dependent parent. File online at va.gov/manage-dependents/add-remove-form-21-686c-674, or mail the paper form to Department of Veterans Affairs, Evidence Intake Center, PO Box 4444, Janesville, WI 53547-4444. Give the date and place of each marriage, birth, or adoption and each dependent's Social Security number.

Done when your 21-686c is filled out for each dependent you're adding or removing.

STEP 4

Add proof only where your situation calls for it.

For most marriages and births, VA accepts your signed statement on the form as proof, as long as it gives the date, place, names, and Social Security numbers. VA asks for documents in specific cases.

If the child is adopted, **then** send the adoption decree, placement agreement, or revised birth certificate. **If** the child is at least 18, under 23, and in school, **then** add VA Form 21-674. **If** the child became permanently unable to support themselves before 18, **then** send medical records and a doctor's statement, and talk with your representative. **If** you live outside the U.S., or your marriage was common-law or tribal, **then** check the extra documents listed on va.gov. **If** you're adding a dependent parent, **then** use VA Form 21P-509, Statement of Dependency of Parent(s). **If** VA writes asking for a document, **then** send it.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.204(a); 38 CFR § 3.57 (child); 38 CFR § 3.250 (parent).

Done when any proof your situation needs is attached, or you've confirmed none is needed.

STEP 5

Protect your effective date by filing quickly.

If VA gets your claim within one year of a marriage, birth, or adoption, the date of that event generally counts as your date of claim. If you're adding a family you already had when VA first rated you at the qualifying level, file within one year of the notice of that rating decision, and the add can generally go back to the rating's effective date. For a child in school, VA can pay from the 18th birthday or the start of the course if the 21-674 claim is filed within one year of that date. File later and the months in between are generally lost.

Do not wait until things settle down. A birth, a marriage, an adoption, or a rating letter that reaches the threshold is a filing trigger.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.401(b), 3.667(a).

Done when your request is submitted, inside the one-year window that applies to you.

STEP 6

Remove a dependent promptly to avoid a debt.

File a 21-686c to remove a dependent as soon as they stop qualifying, such as after a divorce or a death, or when a child over 18 leaves school. VA stops paying for a child at 18 on its own unless it has school or disability information, but it keeps paying for a spouse until you tell it.

Do not keep extra pay for a dependent who has come off. It becomes an overpayment, and VA can withhold future payments to collect it.

Done when your removal request is in for anyone who no longer qualifies.

STEP 7

Keep dated copies and confirm the change posted.

Save a dated copy of everything you send. Check at va.gov/manage-dependents/view or by phone that the dependent was added or removed and the effective date is right. If the date looks wrong, take the decision letter to a free accredited representative.

Done when you have copies and VA's records show the change.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ I confirmed I meet the rating threshold in 38 U.S.C. 1115.
- ☐ I pulled VA's dependent list and set my household list beside it.
- ☐ I completed VA Form 21-686c for each dependent I'm adding or removing.
- ☐ I added proof where my situation needs it, including 21-674 for a child in school.
- ☐ I filed within the one-year window from the event or from the rating notice.
- ☐ I filed to remove any dependent who no longer qualifies.
- ☐ I kept dated copies and confirmed the change posted.

Reminder: rules and rates change. Check any current figure at va.gov. Help from an accredited Veterans Service Organization is free. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision on your claim. After that, they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. This guide prepared you for the task. The evidence in your file decides the result.

Get Free, Accredited Help

For anything about your own claim, talk to an accredited representative. Help from an accredited Veterans Service Organization is free. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision on your claim. After that, they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. Free help is available through Veterans Service Organizations such as the DAV, VFW, and American Legion, and through county and state veterans offices.

To find one near you, visit va.gov/get-help-from-accredited-representative. Representation begins only when you sign VA Form 21-22 (for a Veterans Service Organization) or 21-22a (for an individual agent or attorney). With one rare exception for a single unpaid case, only accredited people can represent you before the VA, and only an accredited agent or attorney can charge you a fee. Nothing in this guide creates that relationship.

A warning about claim sharks. Anyone who offers to file your initial claim for a fee, or who guarantees you a rating or a percentage, is selling something you shouldn't buy. Accredited Veterans Service Organizations help at no charge, and accredited claims agents and attorneys may charge only after VA issues its initial decision, within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. Report predatory companies to the VA Office of Inspector General at 1-800-488-8244.

Keep Going: The Full Guide

This field guide is one of the short, do-this-now guides in the FWD Assist HQ line. See every FWD Assist HQ title that is out now at fwdassisthq.com/books.

Current as of October 2026. Rules, forms, and figures change. Check current details at va.gov.

About the Author

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J. Erickson is a service-disabled Air Force veteran. He served as a military firefighter and as a veteran service officer, where he spent years walking veterans through the same claims process he writes about now. He holds an MBA and writes plain-language guides for veterans who want to understand the system without a translator.

He writes the For the Rest of Us series at fwdassisthq.com. This guide is published by FWD Assist HQ as a veteran education resource. It is not affiliated with or endorsed by the Department of Veterans Affairs.