

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Applying for VR&E (Chapter 31)

Apply for Veteran Readiness and Employment
and prepare for your evaluation.



J. Erickson

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 a rating; the evidence in your file decides 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.

Applying for VR&E (Chapter 31)

Apply for Veteran Readiness and Employment and prepare for your evaluation.

Companion to *The VR&E Playbook*.

This is general education, not legal or claims advice, and not guidance for your specific claim. It cannot promise you a rating 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: You'll submit a complete VA Form 28-1900 for Veteran Readiness and Employment (Chapter 31) and walk into your first meeting with a VR&E counselor prepared.

This guide prepares you for the task. It does not and cannot promise a rating, a percentage, or an outcome. The counselor makes the entitlement determination, and the evidence in your file decides the result.

WHAT YOU NEED BEFORE YOU START

- ☐ Your DD-214 (discharge summary), with your date of separation noted.
- ☐ Your VA disability rating decision letter or letters, with the notification date noted.
- ☐ A one-page resume or work history summary.
- ☐ Transcripts or education records, if you have them.
- ☐ Any medical records related to your service-connected conditions.
- ☐ Your VA.gov login, so you can file online.

When to start: Now. If you were discharged before January 1, 2013, a 12-year basic period of eligibility may be running, so don't wait. If you were discharged on or after January 1, 2013, that time limit doesn't apply to you, but every month you wait is a month of support you don't use.

Start Here: The Basics

Veteran Readiness and Employment, or VR&E, also called Chapter 31, helps veterans with a service-connected disability prepare for, find, and keep suitable work, or achieve independent living. It can cover training, education, and support services, and it turns on having a qualifying disability and an employment need. The 12-year time limit doesn't apply to veterans discharged on or after January 1, 2013.

The Steps

STEP 1

Run the eligibility self-check before you assume the answer.

VR&E has two tests. First, a discharge that isn't dishonorable and a compensable service-connected disability rating. At the lowest compensable rating, the counselor must also find a serious employment handicap; at any higher rating, an employment handicap is enough. Second, an employment handicap: your service-connected disability limits your ability to prepare for, get, or keep suitable work. Service members can qualify before discharge with a memorandum rating or while going through IDES or a Physical Evaluation Board.

If you have a qualifying rating and a career limitation, **then** apply. **If** you're unsure whether your disability counts as an employment handicap, **then** apply anyway and let the counselor decide, or ask a free accredited representative first.

Do not rule yourself out because your rating feels low. The rating only gets you in the door; the employment handicap decides entitlement. Check the current rating minimum at [va.gov](https://www.va.gov).

Where this is written down: 38 U.S.C. § 3102; 38 CFR § 21.40.

Done when you can state your service-connected condition and one clear way it limits your career options.

STEP 2

Find out whether a deadline applies to you.

A 12-year basic period of eligibility applies only to veterans discharged before January 1, 2013. If it applies, it runs from the later of your separation date or the date VA notified you of your first qualifying service-connected rating. Pull both dates and use the later one.

If you were discharged on or after January 1, 2013, **then** no time limit applies and you can file whenever you're ready. **If** you were discharged before January 1, 2013, **then** calculate the later date, add 12 years, and mark that deadline on a calendar. **If** that deadline is near or has passed, **then** apply anyway and ask the counselor about an extension, such as the one for a serious employment handicap.

Do not calculate a pre-2013 deadline from your discharge date alone. If your rating came after discharge, the clock runs from the rating date. That's an easy date to get wrong.

Where this is written down: 38 U.S.C. § 3103; 38 CFR §§ 21.41, 21.42(a), 21.44.

Done when you know whether a deadline applies and, if it does, the exact date.

STEP 3

Keep the VR&E application separate from any compensation claim.

An intent to file (VA Form 21-0966) protects the effective date of a compensation, pension, or survivor claim. It doesn't apply to a VR&E application and doesn't stop a VR&E deadline. For VR&E, the application itself is what counts.

If you have a disability you haven't claimed yet, **then** file an intent to file for that compensation claim too, and work it alongside this application. **If** you're not ready to file the VR&E application, **then** know that nothing holds your place but filing it.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.155(b).

Done when you know your VR&E application has to be filed on its own, and any unclaimed condition has an intent to file.

STEP 4

Gather your documents into one place before you open the form.

Collect your DD-214, rating decision letter or letters, a one-page resume, education transcripts if any, and medical records for your service-connected conditions. If you have multiple conditions rated separately, gather documentation for all of them, because their combined effect on employment can meet the handicap standard when one alone might not.

Done when every document above is in one folder, digital or paper.

STEP 5

Complete VA Form 28-1900 field by field.

The form's full name is Application for Veteran Readiness and Employment for Claimants with Service-Connected Disabilities (revised December 2025). It asks for your identifying and contact information, your education and work history, and the kind of work you're aiming for. Fill in every field labeled required.

If you have a specific goal, **then** describe it plainly, such as "nursing degree" or "electrician certification."

If you do not have a goal yet, **then** write "Undecided, seeking counselor guidance." That is acceptable and expected. The counselor helps you develop the goal.

Do not leave a required field blank, and don't submit a paper form unsigned. A missing field or signature means VA has to come back to you.

Done when every required field is filled, the vocational goal field is answered, and you have signed and dated the last page.

STEP 6

Submit the application and save your confirmation.

You can apply online at va.gov, by mail to Department of Veterans Affairs, VR&E Intake Center, PO Box 5210, Janesville, WI 53547-5210, in person at a VA regional office, or with an accredited representative. Online filing gives you a confirmation on screen.

If you want help or lack reliable internet, **then** apply in person at a VA regional office or with a representative. **If** you mail it, **then** keep a copy and proof of mailing.

Do not submit without capturing the confirmation number. Screenshot it or save the confirmation email. You will need it to follow up.

Done when the application is submitted and your confirmation or proof of mailing is saved somewhere you can find it.

STEP 7

Watch for your orientation scheduling and confirm the date.

After you apply, VA invites you to an orientation and schedules a meeting with a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor at your nearest VA regional office. You'll get a call or letter with the date.

If you haven't heard anything after a few weeks, **then** call 1-800-827-1000 and ask about your VR&E application, or contact your nearest VA regional office.

Do not ignore a request for more information. Answer it fast, because the process waits on you.

Done when your orientation date is confirmed and on your calendar.

STEP 8

Learn the five tracks so you can take part in the conversation.

VR&E offers five service tracks. Track 1, Reemployment, returns you to a former employer with accommodations. Track 2, Rapid Access to Employment, is quick placement using skills you already have. Track 3, Self-Employment, supports starting a business. Track 4, Employment Through Long-Term Services, funds education or extended training. Track 5, Independent Living, is for veterans who can't work right now but can become more independent in daily life.

If work isn't feasible for you right now, **then** ask your counselor about Independent Living by name. **If** your situation genuinely branches beyond these descriptions, **then** talk it through with a free accredited representative.

Done when you can name the track or two that seem to fit your situation and the reason why.

STEP 9

Pack for orientation and prepare what you will say.

Bring your DD-214, your rating decision letters, service treatment records if you have copies, a one-page resume, transcripts if applicable, and any medical records for your service-connected conditions. Also prepare a short explanation of your primary condition and how it affects you at work, and three to five possible career directions.

If you have documented that jobs open to you are limited or lower-paying because of your disability, **then** bring that labor market research too, because it supports the employment handicap finding.

Done when your documents are packed and you can explain, in a few sentences, how your disability limits your work.

STEP 10

Attend orientation and let the counselor make the entitlement determination.

The counselor reviews your records and asks about your service, disability, work history, and interests, then decides whether you have an employment handicap and are entitled to services. Having your evidence in hand helps the counselor decide without extra rounds.

If you are found entitled, **then** the counselor assigns you to a caseload and begins developing your Individualized Written Rehabilitation Plan (IWRP). **If** a rating appeal or determination is still pending, **then** know your entitlement decision may wait for the rating, but your application is already in process. **If** you're found not entitled, **then** the letter explains why, and you can ask for a supervisor's review or a decision review within one year.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 21.40; 38 CFR § 21.416.

Done when you have attended orientation and know your entitlement status or when it will be decided.

STEP 11

Read the draft IWRP in full before you sign anything.

The IWRP is the written plan that governs your program: your goal, the services, the timeline, your financial support, and your responsibilities. It comes in draft form first. Take it home if you can and check every line against what you discussed.

If the goal, services, or timeline do not match what you agreed to, **then** request the changes in writing before you sign, because you and the counselor must both agree to the final version. **If** the counselor still disagrees, **then** ask for the reasoning in writing and request a supervisor review.

Do not sign an IWRP you haven't read in full, or under time pressure. A plan can be changed later, but errors you sign can shape your program for months.

Done when the IWRP matches what you agreed to and you sign it knowingly.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ Ran the eligibility self-check and named a way my disability limits my career.
- ☐ Determined whether a deadline applies and, if so, marked the exact date.
- ☐ Kept the VR&E application separate, and filed an intent to file for any unclaimed condition.
- ☐ Gathered DD-214, rating letters, resume, transcripts, and medical records into one folder.
- ☐ Completed VA Form 28-1900 with every required field and a vocational goal answered.
- ☐ Submitted the application and saved my confirmation.
- ☐ Confirmed my orientation date and put it on the calendar.
- ☐ Learned the five tracks and identified the ones that fit me.
- ☐ Packed my documents and prepared what to say about my disability and work.
- ☐ Attended orientation and know my entitlement status.
- ☐ Read the draft IWRP in full and requested changes before signing.

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 the short, do-this-now companion to the book *The VR&E Playbook*. 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.

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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.

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