

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Filing a Secondary Service-Connection Claim

File a complete secondary service-connection claim.



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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 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.

Filing a Secondary Service-Connection Claim

File a complete secondary service-connection claim.

Companion to *VA Secondary Claims Manual*.

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: By the end of this guide you'll file a complete secondary service-connection claim that names your service-connected primary condition, includes medical evidence of the link, and is protected by an Intent to File.

This guide prepares you for the task. It doesn't and can't promise a rating, a percentage, or an outcome. The evidence in your file decides the result.

WHAT YOU NEED BEFORE YOU START

- ☐ Your current VA rating decision, listing each service-connected condition and its diagnostic code.
- ☐ A current diagnosis for the secondary condition you want to claim.
- ☐ Your medication list, so you can see which conditions you're already being treated for.
- ☐ Access to VA.gov to file the Intent to File and the claim, or the VA benefits line at 1-800-827-1000.
- ☐ The name of a treating provider who may write a medical opinion (the doctor treating the secondary condition).
- ☐ A free accredited representative on standby for anything that branches beyond this guide.

When to start: the day you spot a condition that may flow from a service-connected primary. File the Intent to File first, then gather evidence while the clock runs.

Start Here: The Basics

Some conditions are caused or made worse by a condition VA has already service connected. That's a secondary service-connection claim. Think of a service-connected knee that throws off your gait and wears out a hip, or a mental health condition tied to chronic pain. You still need a current diagnosis and evidence of the link, but the in-service part is carried by the primary condition.

There are two ways in. The primary can *cause* the new condition. Or the primary can *make worse* a condition that isn't service connected. That second path needs proof of how bad the condition was before it got worse, called the baseline. This guide walks the secondary path step by step.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.310(a) and (b).

The Steps

STEP 1

Confirm the service-connected primary that will anchor the claim.

Pull your rating decision and pick the condition you believe caused or worsened the new one. It has to be service connected already. It can be rated at any level, including zero. A condition rated at zero anchors a secondary claim the same way any other does.

Done when you can name the primary condition and its diagnostic code straight from your rating decision.

STEP 2

Run a secondary conditions audit to find your candidates.

List every service-connected condition. For each one, ask what else you're being treated for now. Pull your medication list; each drug usually points to a condition. Then test each candidate against three questions. Is it diagnosed and treated now? Does the timeline make sense? Is there a medical reason the primary could cause it or make it worse?

If the new condition started after the primary, **then** it's a candidate for the "caused by" path. **If** it started first and your service-connected condition has made it worse, **then** it's a secondary aggravation claim, and you'll need records showing how bad it was before it got worse (the baseline). **If** a condition began before you entered service and service itself made it worse, **then** that's a different claim with a different standard; ask a free accredited representative.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.310(a) and (b); 38 CFR § 3.306.

Done when you have a short written list of candidates that pass all three questions, each marked "caused by" or "made worse by."

STEP 3

Confirm a current diagnosis for the secondary condition.

A secondary claim needs a current disability in your records, not a passing complaint. "Trouble sleeping sometimes" isn't a diagnosis; a sleep study showing apnea is. Find the record that names the condition.

Done when you have a medical record that names the secondary condition as a diagnosis.

STEP 4

File one Intent to File for compensation now.

Submit an Intent to File online at va.gov/resources/your-intent-to-file-a-va-claim, call 1-800-827-1000, or mail VA Form 21-0966 (Intent to File a Claim for Compensation and/or Pension, or Survivors Pension and/or D.I.C.). One Intent to File covers compensation as a whole. It doesn't need to list conditions. If VA gets your complete claim within one year, VA treats the claim as filed on the Intent to File date.

If you have several candidates, **then** put all of them on the same 21-526EZ. Only the first complete claim filed after an Intent to File gets its date. **If** you file one condition now and plan to add others later, **then** submit a new Intent to File the day you file, to cover what's left.

Do not spend months gathering records before you file the Intent to File. Every month you wait can be back pay you can't get back.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.155(b) and (d)(1)(ii).

Done when your Intent to File confirmation is saved.

STEP 5

Check for a presumptive pathway before you build a secondary claim.

Some conditions are presumed service connected for certain service, with no medical opinion on the link. Hypertension is one example people get wrong. The PACT Act added it as a presumptive condition only for veterans with qualifying herbicide (Agent Orange) exposure, not for burn pits or post-9/11 deployments. If a presumption fits, it can be a simpler route than filing secondary.

If a presumption clearly applies to your service, **then** claim it that way. **If** it doesn't, or you aren't sure, **then** keep building the secondary claim and check eligibility with a free accredited representative.

Where this is written down: 38 U.S.C. § 1116(a)(2); 38 CFR § 3.307; 38 CFR § 3.309.

Done when you've decided, for each condition, whether it goes the presumptive route or the secondary route.

STEP 6

Gather the evidence package for each secondary condition.

Collect the current diagnosis, VA and private treatment records, your medication records, and a simple timeline of when the secondary started compared with the primary. For a "made worse by" claim, find the oldest records that show how bad the condition was before it got worse. Where medical literature describes the link, pull a few articles to hand your provider.

Done when each condition has its own folder with diagnosis, records, a timeline and, for aggravation, the baseline records.

STEP 7

Ask the treating provider for a medical opinion.

Ask the doctor treating the secondary condition for a letter that names the service-connected primary, names the secondary condition, explains how one leads to the other, and addresses your own history and timeline. The letter should say whether the secondary is "at least as likely as not" caused by, or made worse by, the primary. That phrase means a fifty-fifty or better likelihood, not certainty. VA may also get its own opinion at a C&P exam, so a private letter helps but isn't the only way in.

Do not submit one blanket letter that lumps several conditions together as "all related." Each condition needs its own reasoning, either as a separate letter or a clearly separated section per condition.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.102; 38 CFR § 3.159(c)(4).

Done when you hold a signed opinion that ties one specific secondary to one specific primary, or you know VA will get one at the exam.

STEP 8

Write a personal statement naming the primary.

Use VA Form 21-4138 (Statement in Support of Claim) to describe when the secondary condition started, how it affects you, and that you're claiming it as secondary to your named service-connected primary. Name the primary by condition and diagnostic code so nothing is left to guesswork.

Done when your statement names the primary and the secondary and explains the link in your own words.

STEP 9

Complete VA Form 21-526EZ as a secondary claim.

File VA Form 21-526EZ (Application for Disability Compensation and Related Compensation Benefits). In Section V, Item 16, list each condition the way the form's own example does: "LEFT KNEE, SECONDARY TO RIGHT KNEE." Name the service-connected primary for every secondary, matching what your medical opinion and statement say. The online form asks the same question in its own words.

Do not list the condition with no link at all. A rater who has to guess which primary you mean can guess wrong.

Done when every secondary on the form names its primary.

STEP 10

Attach your evidence and decide on a Fully Developed Claim.

Attach the medical opinion, supporting records, and any lay statements. If you're sending all the evidence you have and you can certify there's nothing more for VA to get, you can file under the Fully Developed Claims program. VA says that can speed the decision and carries no risk; if VA finds it needs other records, it moves the claim to the standard process.

Done when every exhibit is attached and you've chosen the Fully Developed Claims program or the standard process.

STEP 11

Know which effective date applies.

For a secondary claim, the effective date is the later of two dates. One is the date VA received the claim, or your Intent to File date if the claim came in within a year of it. The other is the date the condition arose. It doesn't reach back to the primary's date, and evidence that the secondary started years ago doesn't move it earlier. That's why Step 4 matters so much.

If you think you raised this condition in an earlier claim VA never decided, **then** bring that paperwork to a free accredited representative; that's the case where an earlier date may be possible.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.400; 38 CFR § 3.155(b).

Done when you know the date your claim is protected from and have your Intent to File confirmation with your copy of the claim.

STEP 12

Submit, attend any exam, and track the claim to a decision.

Submit online at [VA.gov](https://va.gov) or mail it to Department of Veterans Affairs, Claims Intake Center, PO Box 4444, Janesville, WI 53547-4444. Watch your claim status. If VA schedules a Compensation and Pension exam, go, and describe the secondary condition's frequency, severity, and impact honestly. Answer any request for more information quickly.

If the claim is granted, **then** check the current compensation figure at va.gov and move to your next candidate. **If** it's denied, **then** pick a review within one year of the decision notice to keep your effective date. Choose a Supplemental Claim (VA Form 20-0995), a Higher-Level Review (VA Form 20-0996), or a Board Appeal (VA Form 10182). A free accredited representative can help you pick.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.2500.

Done when the claim is submitted, any exam is attended, and you have a decision or a next step lined up.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ Confirmed the service-connected primary and its diagnostic code.
- ☐ Ran a secondary conditions audit and marked each candidate "caused by" or "made worse by."
- ☐ Confirmed a current, documented diagnosis for the secondary condition.
- ☐ Filed one Intent to File for compensation and saved the confirmation.
- ☐ Checked for a presumptive pathway before building the secondary claim.
- ☐ Gathered records, medication history, a timeline and, for aggravation, the baseline.
- ☐ Got a medical opinion for each condition, or know VA will get one.
- ☐ Wrote a personal statement (VA Form 21-4138) naming the primary.
- ☐ Completed VA Form 21-526EZ with every secondary naming its primary in Item 16.
- ☐ Attached exhibits and chose the Fully Developed Claims program or the standard process.
- ☐ Know which effective date applies to the claim.
- ☐ Submitted, attended any exam, and tracked the claim to a decision.

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 *VA Secondary Claims Manual*. 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.

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