

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Gather Your Evidence, the Three Legs

Gather the three legs of evidence every
service-connection claim stands on.



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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. Copyright 2026 FWD Assist HQ. All rights reserved.

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.

Gather Your Evidence, the Three Legs

Gather the three legs of evidence every service-connection claim stands on.

Companion to *VA Disability Primer*.

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 [Get Free, Accredited Help](#) at the back). 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 gathered the three legs of service connection for each condition: a current disability, an in-service event, and a link between them.

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 list of conditions and the path for each.
- ☐ Your service treatment records and current medical records, or a request in for them.
- ☐ Your C-file, if you've filed before and have it.
- ☐ A folder system, digital or paper, to keep each condition's evidence together.

When to start: Start as soon as you know what you're claiming. Evidence takes time to gather, so begin early, with an Intent to File protecting your date for a year.

Start Here: The Basics

Most VA claims stand on three legs. Leg one is a current disability. Leg two is an in-service event, injury, illness, or exposure. Leg three is a link between the two, usually a medical opinion. You don't have to supply every leg yourself. VA requests federal records, and when the file needs it, VA orders an exam or a medical opinion. Presumptive conditions are the exception on leg three. For those, the law supplies the link if you have the condition and the qualifying service. This guide walks you through building all three legs, condition by condition.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.303; 38 CFR § 3.159(c); 38 CFR § 3.307.

The Steps

STEP 1

Leg one: gather current medical evidence for each condition.

How. For each condition, gather recent records that name the diagnosis or describe the problem: office notes, test results, imaging, and labs. A Disability Benefits Questionnaire (DBQ) is a VA form your own licensed provider can fill out. VA posts the public DBQs at benefits.va.gov/compensation/dbq_publicdbqs.asp. VA doesn't pay for a private DBQ.

Decision point. If you have a diagnosis on record, then you have leg one. If you have symptoms but no diagnosis, then keep the condition on your list, get seen if you can, and describe the symptoms. When there's evidence of persistent or recurring symptoms, VA may examine you. Some Gulf War veterans can claim certain undiagnosed illnesses by their symptoms.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.159(c)(4)(i)(A); 38 CFR § 3.317.

Done when each condition has current medical evidence on record or is marked for VA's exam.

STEP 2

Leg two: document the in-service event or exposure.

How. Find the in-service injury, illness, event, or exposure in your service treatment records and personnel records. Mark the exact pages that mention it.

Decision point. If the event is in your records, then flag those pages. If the records are incomplete, then tell VA where other records may be so VA can try to get them. Add statements from people who saw what happened.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.159(c)(1) to (c)(3).

Done when each condition has an in-service event identified in records, supported by a statement, or listed for VA to find.

STEP 3

Leg three: line up the link between the two.

How. For direct and secondary claims, the link is usually a medical opinion. It says whether your condition is "at least as likely as not" connected to the in-service event or to a service-connected condition. VA gets one through its exam when it needs one. You can also send a private opinion from a qualified provider. A useful one explains the reasoning and cites your records.

Don't rely on an opinion that only says "possibly" or "may be related." VA gives little weight to an opinion that only speculates.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.159(c)(4); 38 CFR § 3.102; 38 CFR § 3.310.

Done when each non-presumptive condition has a reasoned private opinion, or a note that you'll rely on VA's exam.

STEP 4

For presumptive conditions, confirm the rule fits.

How. Some conditions are presumptive. That covers certain chronic diseases that show up within a year after discharge at a level VA would pay compensation for (a few have longer windows), and certain conditions in former prisoners of war. It also covers certain diseases tied to exposures such as Agent Orange, Gulf War service, or burn pits under the PACT Act. Check the current lists and service requirements at va.gov/disability/eligibility.

Decision point. If your condition and service meet a presumptive rule, then you generally don't need a separate link opinion. VA can still rebut a presumption with evidence of another cause. If the rule doesn't fit, then build the link as in Step 3.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.307; 38 CFR § 3.309; 38 CFR 3.317; 38 CFR 3.320.

Done when each presumptive condition is checked against the current list and service requirements.

STEP 5

Add personal and buddy statements to fill gaps.

How. Write your own statement on VA Form 21-4138, Statement in Support of Claim, and ask others for buddy statements on VA Form 21-10210, Lay/Witness Statement. Use them to describe events and symptoms the records don't capture. Stick to what each person saw or lived.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.159(a)(2).

Done when statements are drafted for any gap a record can't fill.

STEP 6

Index each condition's three legs.

How. For each condition, make a short index showing where each leg lives in your package, or that you're relying on VA for one of them. Name files clearly.

Done when a stranger could open your package and find all three legs for each condition without hunting.

STEP 7

Take any missing leg to a free accredited representative.

How. If a condition is missing a leg you can't fill, bring it to a free accredited representative before you file. A missing leg doesn't have to stop you from filing. It tells you where the work is.

Don't pay anyone up front for help with your evidence. Accredited Veterans Service Organizations help at no charge. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision, and after that only within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. Anyone charging an upfront fee to file your initial claim is a claim shark.

Where this is written down: 38 U.S.C. § 5904(c)(1).

Done when every condition either has all three legs or a clear plan, checked with a representative where needed.

Recap Checklist

This is the page to photograph and keep with you. Tick each line as you finish it.

RUN THE WHOLE TASK FROM HERE

- ☐ Leg one: current medical evidence for each condition, or a plan for VA's exam.
- ☐ Leg two: an in-service event documented, supported by a statement, or listed for VA to find.
- ☐ Leg three: a reasoned opinion or VA's exam for each non-presumptive condition.
- ☐ Checked presumptive conditions against the current list and service requirements.
- ☐ Added personal and buddy statements (VA Forms 21-4138 and 21-10210) to fill gaps.
- ☐ Indexed each condition's three legs so they're easy to find.
- ☐ Took any missing leg to a free accredited representative.

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 Disability Primer*. 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.