

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Organizing Your Benefits and Money

Organize your VA benefits and money into one
plan you can act 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.

Organizing Your Benefits and Money

Organize your VA benefits and money into one plan you can act on.

Companion to *The Veteran's Financial Playbook*.

BEFORE YOU READ ONE MORE LINE

If you are in a mental health crisis, stop and call the **Veterans Crisis Line: dial 988, then press 1**. You can also text 838255. It's free, confidential, and open 24 hours a day, and many of the people who answer are veterans.

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 have your VA payment verified, sorted with the rest of your money, and written into one working plan you can act on.

This guide prepares you for the task. It's education, not financial, tax, or legal advice, and it can't promise an outcome.

WHAT YOU NEED BEFORE YOU START

- ☐ Your VA.gov sign-in.
- ☐ Your latest VA rating decision or award letter.
- ☐ A recent bank statement showing your VA deposit.
- ☐ A list of your monthly income sources (job, part-time, freelance).
- ☐ A rough list of your essential monthly expenses (housing, utilities, food, transportation, insurance, minimum debt payments).
- ☐ A spreadsheet or notebook to hold it all in one place.

When to start: As soon as your first VA payment lands, and again any time your rating, dependents, or income change. This is a plan you update, not a one-time chore.

Start Here: The Basics

VA benefits help most when you know exactly what you get and why. Organizing your benefits and money means knowing what you receive, keeping VA (and DFAS, if you're retired) up to date on changes, knowing how your benefits are taxed, and keeping your documents where you can find them. This guide is a plain framework for that. It's education, not financial advice, and the figures change, so check current details at va.gov.

The Steps

STEP 1

Verify your exact monthly VA payment.

Sign in at va.gov/va-payment-history and read your most recent payment. Print or save the page, and keep it with your award letter.

Do not build your plan on an online estimate or calculator. Your real amount can differ because of dependents, a withholding, or a pending change.

Done when you have your verified monthly amount saved, straight from VA.gov.

STEP 2

Confirm your dependents are on file.

Check whether VA lists your spouse and eligible children. VA adds money for dependents only once your combined rating reaches the level the law sets (check it at va.gov), and only for dependents VA has on file.

If your rating is at or above that level and dependents are missing, **then** file VA Form 21-686c, Application Request to Add and/or Remove Dependents. **If** they already show, **then** move on.

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

Done when every eligible dependent shows on your record, or your 21-686c is filed.

STEP 3

Note how your VA money is taxed.

VA disability compensation and pension aren't taxable income, and you don't report them on your federal return. Military retired pay is different: it's generally taxable, and states treat it in different ways, so check your state revenue agency for that part.

Where this is written down: 38 U.S.C. § 5301(a)(1); 26 U.S.C. § 104(a)(4).

Done when you've marked which of your income is tax-free and which is taxable.

STEP 4

Sort your income into three lines.

Write three lines. VA income: your compensation, which doesn't depend on whether you're working for most veterans. Steady income: full-time work. Variable income: part-time, freelance, seasonal, or investment income.

If you're paid at the total rate because of individual unemployability (TDIU), or you get VA pension, **then** your VA income does depend on work or income. Talk to an accredited representative before you take a job or report new income.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.343(c), 4.16 (TDIU); 38 CFR § 3.271 (pension income).

Done when every dollar you receive is written on one of the three lines.

STEP 5

List your essential monthly expenses next to your income.

Add up housing, utilities, food, transportation, insurance, and minimum debt payments. Put the total beside your three income lines.

Done when your essential expense total sits next to your income in one view.

STEP 6

See how much of your essentials your VA income covers.

Subtract your VA amount from your essential expenses. What's left is the gap your other income has to cover.

Done when you know the gap between your VA income and your essential expenses.

STEP 7

Set an emergency-fund target.

If your VA income doesn't depend on work, it keeps arriving if a job ends. One way to size the fund is three months of the gap from Step 6 rather than three months of all your expenses. If your VA income does depend on work (Step 4), size it on your full expenses.

Done when you've written a specific target and where you'll keep the money.

STEP 8

Test any big decision on VA plus steady income only.

For housing, debt, or a career move, run the numbers using just your VA income plus full-time pay. Treat variable income as extra, not as something to lean on.

If the decision works on VA plus steady income, **then** it passes this test. **If** it only works when you count variable income, **then** slow down and rework it.

Done when your next big decision has been run on VA plus steady income.

STEP 9

Write down what can change your VA payment.

Note the things that move it: the yearly cost-of-living increase, which takes effect December 1 and first shows in the payment you get around January 1; adding or removing a dependent; a rating increase or reduction; and, for TDIU or pension, changes in work or income.

Do not sit on a change VA needs to know about, such as a divorce, a child aging out, or new income on pension. An unreported change can turn into a VA debt later.

Done when the list is in your plan, with who to tell for each change.

STEP 10

Decide now where the yearly increase goes.

When your payment rises with the cost-of-living increase, send the added amount to savings or your emergency fund the same month, instead of letting it disappear into spending.

Done when you have a written rule for where the yearly increase goes.

STEP 11

Screen out claim sharks and predatory offers before you sign anything.

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; after that, they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. Check anyone who offers help at va.gov/get-help-from-accredited-representative. Loans and "benefits recovery" pitches aimed at your VA deposit are common.

Do not pay anyone an upfront fee to raise your rating or to "recover" back benefits. VA doesn't charge for a decision, and a VSO helps for free. Report predatory companies to the VA OIG at 1-800-488-8244.

Done when you've confirmed any advisor is accredited and walked away from any upfront-fee offer.

STEP 12

Put the plan on a schedule so it stays current.

Check once a month that the deposit landed correctly, and rework the whole plan each quarter or whenever your rating, dependents, or income change.

Done when a monthly check and a quarterly review are on your calendar.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ Verified my exact monthly VA payment on VA.gov and saved the page.
- ☐ Confirmed dependents are on file, or filed VA Form 21-686c.
- ☐ Marked which income is tax-free and which is taxable.
- ☐ Sorted all income into VA, steady, and variable, and checked whether my VA income depends on work.
- ☐ Listed essential monthly expenses beside my income.
- ☐ Figured the gap between VA income and essential expenses.
- ☐ Set an emergency-fund target.
- ☐ Tested my next big decision on VA plus steady income only.
- ☐ Wrote down what can change my VA payment and who to tell.
- ☐ Made a rule for where the yearly increase goes.
- ☐ Screened for claim sharks and refused any upfront-fee offer.
- ☐ Put a monthly check and quarterly review on my calendar.

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 Veteran's Financial Playbook*. See every FWD Assist HQ title that is out now at fwdassisthq.com/books.

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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.