

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Requesting a Higher-Level Review (VA Form 20-0996)

File a complete Higher-Level Review request on
the existing record.



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.

Requesting a Higher-Level Review (VA Form 20-0996)

File a complete Higher-Level Review request on the existing record.

Companion to *The Appeals 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: By the end of this guide you'll have filed a complete Higher-Level Review on VA Form 20-0996 that points to the error on the existing record, and VA will have received it inside the one-year window.

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

- ☐ The VA decision letter you disagree with, and the date on it.
- ☐ A clear, specific reason you believe the decision was wrong on the evidence already in the file.
- ☐ Access to VA.gov to file online, or a paper VA Form 20-0996 and the mailing address for your benefit type.
- ☐ A free accredited representative on standby to help pin down the error.

When to start: As soon as you can name the specific error. VA has to receive the request within one year of the date on your decision letter.

Start Here: The Basics

A Higher-Level Review asks an experienced reviewer who had no part in the first decision to look at the same evidence again, from scratch. That reviewer can change the decision for an error or a difference of opinion. You can't submit new evidence in this lane. You can ask for one informal conference, a phone call where you or your representative point out the error. Any finding that was already in your favor stays in your favor unless it was clearly and unmistakably wrong.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.2601(e), (f), (h), (i) and (j).

The Steps

STEP 1

Confirm a Higher-Level Review is the right lane.

This lane is for errors on the existing record, not for adding evidence. It's open after a decision on an initial claim or a Supplemental Claim.

If you have no new evidence and think VA misread the facts already in the file or misapplied the rules, **then** a Higher-Level Review fits. **If** you have new and relevant evidence, **then** a Supplemental Claim fits instead. **If** the decision you're answering was itself a Higher-Level Review or a Board decision, **then** this lane isn't available for that issue. After a Higher-Level Review, your choices are a Supplemental Claim or a Board Appeal. After a Board decision, they're a Supplemental Claim or the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. **If** you can't tell, **then** ask a free accredited representative.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.2500(c).

Done when you've confirmed this lane is open and you aren't relying on new evidence.

STEP 2

Note your decision date and the one-year deadline.

Find the date on your decision letter and mark one year from it. Set a reminder 30 days before that date.

Do not count on the mail. VA has to receive a complete request inside the year. Miss it, and a Higher-Level Review is off the table for that decision; a Supplemental Claim with new evidence may be the only lane left, usually with a later effective date.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.2601(d); 38 CFR § 3.2500(a) and (h).

Done when your one-year deadline and the reminder are on your calendar.

STEP 3

Pinpoint the error.

Write down exactly what you think VA got wrong, and point to the evidence already in the file that supports you. Also check whether VA failed to get records it should have gotten before it decided. If the reviewer finds that kind of duty-to-assist error and can't grant the full benefit, the claim goes back for the error to be fixed and a new decision.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.2601(g).

Done when you can state the error in one or two sentences and name where the supporting evidence sits in the file.

STEP 4

Decide on the informal conference.

The informal conference is one phone call with the reviewer. It isn't a hearing, and you can't add evidence during it. VA makes reasonable efforts to reach you or your representative; if it can't, the reviewer decides without the call.

If the error is easier to explain out loud, **then** check the informal conference box and know it may add some time. **If** your written point stands on its own, **then** skip it and the reviewer decides on the record.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.2601(h).

Done when you've decided whether to ask for the informal conference.

STEP 5

Fill out VA Form 20-0996.

The form's full name is Decision Review Request: Higher-Level Review. For a disability compensation claim you can file online at va.gov/decision-reviews/higher-level-review. Or print the form and mail it to Department of Veterans Affairs, Claims Intake Center, PO Box 4444, Janesville, WI 53547, or bring it to a VA regional office. Other benefit types use other addresses, listed on that same page. List each issue and the date of its decision.

Do not attach new evidence. The reviewer can't consider it, and the decision will only tell you it wasn't considered. New evidence belongs in a Supplemental Claim or a Board docket that takes evidence.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.2601(c), (f) and (k).

Done when the form names each issue and its decision date and describes the error.

STEP 6

Submit and track the Higher-Level Review.

Save your online confirmation, or keep a copy and proof of the mailing date. Watch your status on VA.gov. If you asked for the informal conference, answer VA's calls and messages so you don't miss it.

Done when the request is submitted, your proof is saved, and you're tracking it.

STEP 7

Know your options if the decision doesn't change.

The new decision starts its own one-year window.

If you now have new and relevant evidence, **then** you can file a Supplemental Claim. **If** you want a Veterans Law Judge to decide, **then** you can file a Board Appeal. A second Higher-Level Review on the same issue isn't allowed. A free accredited representative can help you choose.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.2500(c)(2).

Done when you know your next deadline and the lane you'd use.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ Confirmed the Higher-Level Review lane is open and I'm not relying on new evidence.
- ☐ Marked the one-year deadline (VA must receive it) and a 30-day reminder.
- ☐ Pinpointed the error and where the supporting evidence sits in the file.
- ☐ Decided whether to ask for the informal conference.
- ☐ Filled out VA Form 20-0996 with each issue and decision date, and no new evidence.
- ☐ Submitted, saved proof, and started tracking.
- ☐ Noted the next deadline and next lane: a Supplemental Claim or a Board Appeal.

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 Appeals 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.

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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