

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Requesting an Increased Rating for a Worsening Condition

File a complete request to have a worsening service-connected condition re-evaluated.



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A FWD Assist HQ Field Guide

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By J. Erickson | An FWD Assist HQ Field Guide | Publisher: FWD Assist HQ | First Edition, 2026

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 an Increased Rating for a Worsening Condition

File a complete request to have a worsening service-connected condition re-evaluated.

Companion to *A VA Disability Claims Manual for the Rest of Us*.

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 request for an increased evaluation of a service-connected condition that has gotten worse, with current evidence that speaks to the rating criteria and an Intent to File protecting your date.

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, showing the condition, its diagnostic code, and its effective date.
- ☐ Recent treatment records, tests, or logs showing the condition is worse than at the last rating.
- ☐ A way to read the rating criteria for the condition's diagnostic code (38 CFR Part 4, free at [ecfr.gov](https://www.ecfr.gov)).
- ☐ Access to VA.gov to file the Intent to File and the claim, or the VA benefits line at 1-800-827-1000.
- ☐ A free accredited representative on standby, especially for a long-standing or total rating.

When to start: as soon as the condition is clearly worse. File the Intent to File first to protect the earliest date.

Start Here: The Basics

If a condition VA already service connected has gotten worse, you can ask VA to rate it again at a higher level. You file this on the same form as a new claim, with current evidence measured against the rating criteria for that condition. VA's own form says what it needs: evidence that the condition got worse, and how the worsening affects your ability to work.

One thing to know first. A claim for an increase asks VA to look at how the condition is now. If it has actually improved, VA can propose to lower the rating instead. This guide prints no rating percentages or dollar figures, because they change; check current figures at va.gov.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR Part 4; 38 CFR § 3.105(e).

The Steps

STEP 1

Confirm the condition is service connected and note its rating history.

How: Pull your rating decision. Find the condition, its diagnostic code, and how long it's been rated at its current level.

If the condition has improved in any way, or your rating is permanent and total, **then** talk to a free accredited representative before you file. Ratings held at the same level for five years or more have extra protection against reduction, and a rating held at or above a level for 20 years or more can't be cut below that level except for fraud, but a claim still opens the condition to a fresh look.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.344; 38 CFR § 3.951(b).

Done when you can name the condition, its diagnostic code, and how long it's been at its current rating.

STEP 2

Confirm the worsening is real and documented.

How: Gather recent treatment records, test results, or a symptom log showing the condition is worse than it was at the last rating. Note the date the worsening first shows up in a record.

Done when a record shows the condition is worse than at the last rating, and you know its date.

STEP 3

Read the rating criteria for the condition.

How: Look up the diagnostic code in 38 CFR Part 4, the VA rating schedule, and read the criteria for your current level and the next one up. If you're already at the top level for that code, a higher rating under it isn't possible; ask a representative about other options. Note what separates them, such as a measurement, how often something happens, or how severe it is. For joints and the spine, VA also looks at how much function you lose with pain, weakness, and flare-ups.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR Part 4; 38 CFR § 4.40; 38 CFR § 4.45.

Done when you know which measurements and findings the next level turns on.

STEP 4

File an Intent to File to protect the earliest date.

How: Submit it 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.).

Do not wait. For an increase, VA can pay from the date the record shows the worsening happened, but only if your claim or Intent to File reaches VA within one year of that date. Past that year, the date is the day VA gets your claim.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.400(o)(2); 38 CFR § 3.155(b).

Done when your Intent to File confirmation is saved.

STEP 5

Gather evidence that maps to the criteria.

How: Collect the measurements, frequency and severity logs, and treating-provider notes that speak to the specific criteria you found in Step 3. Ask your provider to record how the condition limits you, including during flare-ups.

Done when your evidence addresses the criteria, not just that the condition exists.

STEP 6

Write your personal statement.

How: Use VA Form 21-4138 (Statement in Support of Claim) to describe the current severity and how it affects your work and daily life. People who see you every day can add statements on VA Form 21-10210 (Lay/Witness Statement).

Done when your statement describes today's severity and its effect on work and home.

STEP 7

Complete VA Form 21-526EZ as a claim for an increase.

How: File VA Form 21-526EZ (Application for Disability Compensation and Related Compensation Benefits) online at VA.gov, or mail it to Department of Veterans Affairs, Claims Intake Center, PO Box 4444, Janesville, WI 53547-4444. Name the service-connected condition and say it has gotten worse.

Done when the form is filed as an increase, naming the condition.

STEP 8

Check whether the worsening supports other filings.

How: A worsening condition can raise other questions. Put any related request on the same claim.

If your service-connected conditions keep you from holding steady work, **then** ask a representative about Total Disability based on Individual Unemployability (TDIU). If the worsening has caused a new, separate condition, **then** consider a secondary claim.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 4.16; 38 CFR § 3.310.

Done when you've noted any related filing the worsening supports.

STEP 9

Attend the C&P exam and describe the condition as it really is.

How: If VA schedules a Compensation and Pension exam, go. Describe your bad days as well as your typical ones: how often flare-ups come, how long they last, and what you can't do during them. The exam is one day, so tell the examiner what the rest of the month looks like.

Do not play your symptoms down because you're having a good day, and don't stretch them either.

Done when the exam is attended and you described the condition honestly and completely.

STEP 10

Track the claim to a decision.

How: Watch your claim status on VA.gov and answer any request quickly.

If the claim is granted, **then** check the current figure at va.gov. **If** the rating is unchanged or denied, **then** to keep your effective date, choose within one year of the decision notice: a Supplemental Claim (VA Form 20-0995), a Higher-Level Review (VA Form 20-0996), or a Board Appeal (VA Form 10182). **If** VA proposes a reduction instead, **then** read the notice for its deadlines and get a representative right away.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.2500; 38 CFR § 3.105(e).

Done when you have a decision or a next step lined up.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ Confirmed the condition is service connected and noted its rating history.
- ☐ Documented that the condition is worse than at the last rating, and when.
- ☐ Read the rating criteria for the condition in 38 CFR Part 4.
- ☐ Filed the Intent to File (VA Form 21-0966).
- ☐ Gathered evidence that maps to the rating criteria.
- ☐ Wrote a personal statement (VA Form 21-4138) describing current severity.
- ☐ Completed VA Form 21-526EZ as a claim for an increase.
- ☐ Checked whether the worsening supports TDIU or a secondary claim.
- ☐ Attended the C&P exam and described the condition as it really is.
- ☐ Tracked the claim to a decision.

Reminder: rules and rates change. Check any current figure at [va.gov](https://www.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 *A VA Disability Claims Manual for the Rest of Us*. 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.