

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Responding to a VA Debt Letter

Respond to a VA debt letter on time and choose
the right option.



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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.

Responding to a VA Debt Letter

Respond to a VA debt letter on time and choose the right option.

Companion to *The VA Debt Letter 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 know how to read your VA debt letter, protect both deadlines, and put the right written response on the record with the right office: a dispute, a waiver request, an appeal of the decision behind the debt, or a repayment or compromise request.

This guide prepares you for the task. It doesn't and can't promise an outcome. The facts in your file and the law decide the result.

WHAT YOU NEED BEFORE YOU START

- ☐ The debt letter itself. Benefit overpayment letters usually come from the Debt Management Center in St. Paul, Minnesota.
- ☐ Two dates: the date printed on the letter and the day it reached you.
- ☐ A folder for every paper that touches this debt, plus a note of every call.
- ☐ Your VA file number or Social Security number and any deduction code from the letter.
- ☐ A rough picture of your household income and necessary expenses, for later steps.
- ☐ The phone number of a free accredited representative (DAV, VFW, American Legion, or your county or state veterans office).

When to start: The day the letter arrives. Two clocks are already running from the date of the notice, and doing nothing uses up your best options.

Start Here: The Basics

A VA debt letter says VA believes it overpaid you, or that you owe a health care copay, and wants the money back. You have options: dispute the debt, ask VA to waive it, appeal the decision that created it, or set up repayment. The regulations count your deadlines from the date of the notice, so the safe move is to count from the date printed on the letter. A written response inside 30 days can keep VA from withholding your benefits while it reviews. This guide walks how to read the letter and respond on time. If money stress has put you in crisis, the [Veterans Crisis Line](#) is there: dial 988, then press 1, or text 838255.

The Steps

STEP 1

Write two dates on the letter: the printed date and the day it arrived.

Write both at the top of the page and on a calendar. Count your deadlines from the printed date, the earlier one. Keep the arrival date too: if the letter reached you late because of a VA or postal error or something else outside your control, the one-year waiver window can be extended.

Do not set the letter aside. Doing nothing while the clocks run is the most expensive move.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 1.963(b).

Done when both dates are on the letter and on your calendar.

STEP 2

Start a file and keep a record of everything.

Copy the letter and put the original in a folder. Every paper you send or get goes in it, plus a note of every call with the date and who you spoke to.

Done when you have one place that holds the letter, your copies, and a running contact log.

STEP 3

Mark both clocks on your calendar today.

Count 30 days from the printed date and label it the collection-pause deadline. Count one year from the printed date and label it the waiver deadline. Set a personal target several days before each.

If you're still inside 30 days, **then** a written dispute or waiver request now keeps VA from withholding your benefits until it decides. **If** 30 days have passed, **then** you can still ask for a waiver inside the year.

Do not rely on an old 180-day waiver deadline you read somewhere. The law changed it to one year.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 1.912a(c); 38 CFR § 1.963(b); 38 U.S.C. § 5302(a).

Done when three dates are on paper: the printed date, 30 days out, and one year out.

STEP 4

Identify which kind of VA debt you have.

Read the sender and the wording. A letter from the Debt Management Center about compensation, pension, or education you were overpaid is a benefit overpayment. A bill for a copay, a clinic or hospital visit, or a prescription is a copay bill, handled on the VA health care side.

If it's a benefit overpayment, **then** the rest of these steps go to the Debt Management Center. **If** it's a copay bill, **then** use the copay dispute and relief steps at va.gov/health-care/pay-copay-bill/dispute-charges; the copay dispute windows are different.

Done when you've written the type at the top of each letter. If you have one of each, make two folders.

STEP 5

Sign in to VA's debt tool and confirm the balance.

Sign in at va.gov/manage-va-debt with a verified account to see your benefit debts and copay bills and copy down your file number and deduction codes. The Debt Management Center's phone is 800-827-0648.

Done when you've confirmed the current balance and copied your identifiers.

STEP 6

Ask for the records behind the debt.

You have the right to inspect and copy the records that show how VA figured the amount and which period it used. Ask early, even if you're leaning toward a waiver, so you can check the math.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 1.911(d).

Done when you've asked for the records and noted the date in your file.

STEP 7

Build a one-page timeline of what happened.

Lay out the change VA points to (a rating reduction, a dependent coming off, an income increase on pension, a dropped class), the date you reported it if you did, and the dates VA says the overpayment started and stopped. Put your timeline next to VA's.

Done when your timeline sits beside VA's dates and any gaps are visible.

STEP 8

Choose your response.

Ask one honest question. Do you think the debt is wrong, or do you accept it but can't or shouldn't have to pay it the way VA is asking? You can use more than one response at the same time.

If the amount or the debt itself is wrong, **then** dispute it (Step 9). **If** you disagree with the VA decision that created the debt, such as a reduction or a dependent removal, **then** ask an accredited representative about a decision review of that decision. **If** the debt is real but repaying would be unfair or a hardship, **then** ask for a waiver (Step 10). **If** it's real and you need workable terms, **then** look at repayment or a compromise (Step 12).

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 1.911(c).

Done when you've picked a direction, even if you combine two.

STEP 9

If the debt is wrong, send a written dispute inside 30 days.

Send a dated, signed statement that names you and the debt, says you dispute whether you owe it or the amount, explains what's wrong, and points to your proof. You can use VA's online dispute form, Ask VA, or mail it to U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Debt Management Center, PO Box 11930, St. Paul, MN 55111.

Do not claim facts you can't support. Any sign of fraud, misrepresentation, or bad faith bars a waiver later.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 1.911(c)(1); 38 CFR § 1.912a(c)(1).

Done when your dispute is sent by a method you can prove and a copy is in your file.

STEP 10

If collecting the debt would be unfair, ask for a waiver.

Send a written waiver request to the Debt Management Center; the Committee on Waivers and Compromises decides it. The test is "equity and good conscience." Speak to the factors that fit you: your fault, VA's fault, undue hardship, whether collection would defeat the purpose of the benefit, unjust enrichment, and whether you gave up something or took on a debt relying on the payments. You can also ask for a hearing.

If you're inside 30 days, **then** a written waiver request now also holds off withholding until VA makes its first decision. **If** 30 days have passed, **then** file anyway while you're inside the year.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 1.963, 1.965; 38 CFR § 1.912a(c)(2).

Done when a clear, dated waiver request is on the record.

STEP 11

Complete VA Form 5655, the Financial Status Report.

This form is a snapshot of what comes in, what goes out, what you own and what you owe. VA needs it for a waiver or compromise request and for a long repayment plan. Use the online version when signed in or the current form from va.gov. Report everything honestly and make sure it tells the same story as your written request.

Do not leave off a fact because it seems unhelpful. A misstatement can bar the relief you're asking for.

Done when a complete, honest Financial Status Report is in with your request.

STEP 12

If you accept the debt, ask for a repayment plan, a compromise, or a pause.

A repayment plan spreads the debt over monthly amounts you can sustain. A compromise offers a lump sum less than the full balance. A hardship suspension asks for a temporary pause. Request these through Ask VA, by phone at 800-827-0648, or by mail. If a waiver is later granted, amounts already collected up to the waived amount can be refunded.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 1.911(d)(7); 38 CFR § 1.967.

Done when your request is in, or you've chosen to pay on a plan while a waiver is pending.

STEP 13

Get free accredited help and keep it on the record.

Call a representative at the DAV, VFW, American Legion, or your county or state veterans office. Bring the letter, both dates, the records, your timeline, and your income and expense picture. If VA denies a waiver or the decision behind the debt goes against you, you can appeal, and a representative can walk you through the options.

Do not pay anyone for VA debt help before you've talked to a free accredited representative. Report anyone who pressures you to pay to the VA OIG at 1-800-488-8244.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 1.958.

Done when a free accredited representative has reviewed your response and knows your deadlines.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ Wrote the printed date and the arrival date on the letter and calendar.
- ☐ Started a file and a contact log.
- ☐ Marked the dates: printed date, 30 days out, one year out.
- ☐ Identified the debt type: benefit overpayment or copay bill.
- ☐ Signed in to VA's debt tool and confirmed the balance and identifiers.
- ☐ Asked for the records behind the debt.
- ☐ Built a one-page timeline against VA's dates.
- ☐ Chose a response: dispute, waiver, appeal of the decision behind it, or repayment.
- ☐ Sent a written dispute inside 30 days if the debt is wrong.
- ☐ Asked for a waiver in writing inside the year if collecting would be unfair.
- ☐ Completed VA Form 5655, the Financial Status Report, honestly.
- ☐ Asked for repayment, a compromise, or a pause if I accept the debt.
- ☐ Got free accredited help and kept the response on the record.

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 VA Debt Letter 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.

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.