

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Writing and Collecting Buddy Statements

Write and collect strong, credible lay statements
for your claim.



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.

Writing and Collecting Buddy Statements

Write and collect strong, credible lay statements for your claim.

Companion to *Buddy Statements for VA Claims*.

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 picked the right witnesses, explained what VA needs from them, and collected signed statements that describe what they personally saw, ready to submit with your claim.

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

- ☐ A list of the events, exposures, or symptoms your claim is built on.
- ☐ Names and contact information for people who were there or who have observed you over time.
- ☐ Your own service dates, unit names, and locations, so witnesses can match details to the record.
- ☐ VA Form 21-10210, Lay/Witness Statement, from va.gov/forms/21-10210 (paper, or submit it online).
- ☐ A single folder, digital and physical, to hold every statement and confirmation.

When to start: Now, while witnesses can still be reached and memories are fresh. If a key witness is elderly or ill, get that statement first. If you haven't filed yet and want to protect your start date while you gather statements, you can file an Intent to File (VA Form 21-0966) first, online at va.gov or by calling 1-800-827-1000. VA treats a complete claim it gets within one year as filed on the intent-to-file date.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.155(b).

Start Here: The Basics

A buddy statement, also called a lay or witness statement, is a plain, first-hand account from you or from someone who knows you: a fellow service member, a spouse, a parent, a coworker. It describes an event or symptoms the official records may not capture. Anyone can give one; no training is needed. The law requires VA to consider all lay and medical evidence, so these statements can fill gaps where the paperwork is thin. A witness can speak to what they saw and heard. A medical link or diagnosis usually still needs a medical opinion, so statements back up the medical evidence rather than replace it.

Where this is written down: 38 U.S.C. § 5107(b); 38 U.S.C. § 1154(a); 38 CFR § 3.159(a)(2).

The Steps

STEP 1

Map the gaps in your evidence.

For each claim, write down what the file is missing: an in-service event with no details in your records, a current symptom with no history, or a work limitation no record captures. A buddy statement should fill a specific gap.

Done when you have one to three named gaps written down for each claim.

STEP 2

Match a witness to each gap.

Think in three witness profiles. The in-service event witness was there when it happened. The continuity witness (often a spouse or parent) has seen the symptom persist for years. The functional witness (an employer, supervisor, or coworker) has watched what you can't do.

If a gap has a living witness who was in a position to observe it, **then** put their name next to that gap. **If** a gap has no available witness, **then** note it and lean on your records and an accredited representative instead.

Done when each gap that can be witnessed has a name next to it.

STEP 3

Keep every witness in the observation lane.

Lay evidence is what a witness saw, heard, felt, smelled, or touched. That's competent evidence VA has to weigh. Medical diagnoses and opinions on cause usually take medical training, so they aren't a lay witness's job.

Do not ask a witness to write a medical conclusion like "he has a herniated disc" or "the blast caused it." VA gives that part little or no weight, and it can distract from what they saw. "He couldn't bend or lift for days" is the observation that holds.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.159(a)(1) and (a)(2).

Done when you can state, in plain words, the observed facts you need from each witness.

STEP 4

Make first contact voice to voice.

Call the witness or meet in person for the first ask. Explain that you're filing a claim and need someone who was there to write what they saw. A real conversation shows you take it seriously and gives them room to say yes or no.

Done when the witness has agreed to write a statement.

STEP 5

Give the four instructions.

Tell the witness: (1) write only what you personally observed, (2) be specific with dates, locations, and physical descriptions, (3) use your own words, no legal or medical terms, and (4) sign and date it.

Done when the witness understands they are describing facts, not reaching conclusions.

STEP 6

Ask the three questions.

Walk them through it on the call: (1) What was the specific event or situation you witnessed? (2) What did you observe about my condition before, after, or over time? (3) How long have you known me, and how do you know me? Their answers become the outline of the statement.

Done when the witness has answered all three out loud with specifics.

STEP 7

Send a written follow-up within twenty-four hours.

Email a reference guide with the four instructions, the three questions, a simple two-paragraph template, and your phone number. This is what the witness works from when they sit down to write.

Do not suggest wording for a conclusion or tell the witness what to say. Coached statements read as directed and lose credibility. Let them use their own words.

Done when the written guide is in the witness's inbox.

STEP 8

Build the statement for credibility.

Ask the witness to include dates and places as best they remember them, and how they know what they're describing (rank, unit, and service dates for a military witness; job title and dates for a civilian). If they don't remember a date exactly, "about" or "in the spring of" is honest and fine.

Done when the statement is specific, factual, and grounded in the witness's own knowledge.

STEP 9

Put it on VA Form 21-10210 with a full signature block.

Use VA Form 21-10210, Lay/Witness Statement, on paper or online. A signed statement on plain paper or on VA Form 21-4138, Statement in Support of Claim, is also accepted. Confirm it carries the witness's full name, phone number, email, signature, and date. The form has the witness certify the statement is true, and the law punishes knowingly false statements. It doesn't need a notary.

Done when the form is complete, signed, dated, and includes contact information.

STEP 10

Review the draft before you collect the signature.

Check it against your briefing: does it answer the three questions, give examples and dates, and stay within what the witness personally saw?

If it covers all three, **then** collect the signature and store it safely. **If** it leaves something out, **then** ask the witness whether they can add it from their own memory. **If** their memory differs from yours, **then** leave their account as they remember it and take the difference to your accredited representative.

Do not ask a witness to change what they remember to match your account. A witness who writes what you told them to write isn't a witness.

Done when the signed statement is complete and in the witness's own words.

STEP 11

Follow up and confirm receipt.

If a witness is running late, send a brief reminder about ten days before your deadline, and again after if needed. When a statement arrives, thank the witness. Tell them VA could contact them about it, so they should keep a copy of what they wrote.

Done when every witness has delivered a signed statement and knows a verification call is possible.

STEP 12

Package the statements and submit them to VA.

Add a short cover page to each statement naming the witness, their relationship to you, and what the statement addresses. Compile everything into one organized PDF. Upload it with your claim at VA.gov, or after you file, with the claim status tool (when VA asks for evidence, you generally have up to one year from its request to send it, but VA can decide after 30 days if you haven't responded, so send statements as soon as you have them). You can also give it to your accredited representative to submit, or mail it to Department of Veterans Affairs, Evidence Intake Center, PO Box 4444, Janesville, WI 53547-4444.

Do not close out without saving proof. Screenshot the VA.gov confirmation and keep a digital and physical copy of every statement, in case a document is lost.

Done when the package is submitted and you have saved the confirmation.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ Wrote down one to three evidence gaps for each claim.
- ☐ Matched a living, available witness to each gap that can be witnessed.
- ☐ Defined the observed facts each witness should describe, and kept them out of medical conclusions.
- ☐ Made first contact by phone or in person and got a yes.
- ☐ Gave the four instructions.
- ☐ Asked the three questions and got specific answers.
- ☐ Sent a written follow-up guide within twenty-four hours, with no coached wording.
- ☐ Asked each witness for dates, places, and how they know what they describe.
- ☐ Put it on VA Form 21-10210 with a full signature block and contact information.
- ☐ Reviewed the draft before signature and left the witness's memory in their own words.
- ☐ Followed up, confirmed receipt, and told the witness VA could contact them.
- ☐ Added cover pages, compiled one PDF, submitted it to VA, and saved the confirmation.

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 *Buddy Statements for VA Claims*. See every FWD Assist HQ title that is out now at fwdassisthq.com/books.

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About the Author

J. Erickson. Author, educator, former veteran service officer.

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.