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New Benefit Takes Effect August 6 for First-Time Filers

WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs announced today that Veterans filing an original Fully Developed Claim (FDC) for service-connected disability compensation may be entitled to up to one-year of retroactive disability benefits. The retroactive benefits, which are in effect Aug. 6, 2013, through Aug. 5, 2015, are a result of a comprehensive legislative package passed by Congress and signed into law by President Obama last year.

“VA strongly encourages Veterans to work with Veterans Service Organizations to file Fully Developed Claims and participate in this initiative, since it means more money in eligible Veterans’ pockets simply by providing VA the information it needs up front,” said Allison A. Hickey, Under Secretary for Benefits. “At the same time, it helps reduce the inventory of pending claims by speeding the process.”

Filing an FDC is typically the fastest way for Veterans to receive a decision on their claims because Fully Developed Claims require Veterans to provide all supporting evidence in their possession when they submit their claims. Often, this is evidence that VA legally must attempt to collect on the Veteran’s behalf, which is already in the Veteran’s possession, or is evidence the Veteran could easily obtain, like private treatment records.

When Veterans submit such evidence with their claims, it significantly reduces the amount of time VA spends gathering evidence from them or other sources -- often the longest part of the claims process. While VA will still make efforts to obtain federal records on the Veterans’ behalf, the submittal of non-federal records (and any federal records the Veteran may have) with the claim allows VA to issue a decision to the Veteran more quickly. Typically, VA processes FDCs in half the time it takes for a traditionally filed claim.

FDCs can be filed digitally through the joint, DoD-VA online portal, *eBenefits* (www.ebenefits.va.gov). VA encourages Veterans who cannot file online to work with an accredited Veterans Service Organization (VSO) who can file claims digitally on Veterans’ behalf. While submitting an FDC provides a faster decision for any compensation or pension claim, only Veterans who are submitting their very first compensation claim as an FDC are potentially eligible for up to one-year of retroactive disability benefits under the newly implemented law.

FDCs help eliminate VA’s claims backlog because they increase production of claims decisions and decrease waiting times. Also, VA assigns FDCs a higher priority than other claims which means Veterans receive decisions to their claim faster than traditional claims.

VA continues to prioritize other specific categories of claims, including those of seriously wounded, terminally ill, Medal of Honor recipients, former Prisoners of War, the homeless and those experiencing extreme financial hardship. As part of its drive to eliminate the claims backlog in 2015, VA also gives a priority to claims more than a year old.

In May, VA announced a new partnership with Veterans Service Organizations and others known as the “Community of Practice,” an effort that seeks to reduce the compensation claims backlog for Veterans by increasing the number of FDCs filed by Veterans and their advocates.

VA is continuing to implement several initiatives to meet the Department’s goal to eliminate the claims backlog in 2015. In May, VA announced that it was mandating overtime for claims processors in its 56 regional benefits offices to increase production of compensation claims decisions through the end of FY 2013. In April, VA launched an initiative to expedite disability compensation claims decisions for Veterans who have waited a year or longer.

As a result of these initiatives, VA’s total claims inventory remains at lower levels not seen since August 2011. The number of claims in the VA backlog – claims pending over 125 days – has been reduced by 17 percent compared to the highest point in March 2013.

Veterans can learn more about disability benefits on the joint Department of Defense—VA web portal *eBenefits* at www.ebenefits.va.gov, and the FDC program at www.benefits.va.gov/fdc/.

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