

# Vietnam Veterans of America Guide to



# Vocational Rehabilitation

Were you disabled in the service?

If so, you may be entitled to training, vocational, medical and assisted living benefits through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

But like Joseph Heller's classic book on the military, *Catch-22*, you aren't considered disabled or entitled to benefits unless you can prove you're disabled. But if you're disabled, you might not have the wherewithal to prove it. And despite what your doctors or Mother Nature tells you, unless the VA gives you paperwork stating that you're disabled . . . you're not.

The *Vietnam Veterans of American Guide to Vocational Rehabilitation* intends to provide you with understanding, tools and means to claim your vocational rehabilitation training and job placement benefits.

### **WHAT IS A DISABILITY?**

According to the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) a service-connected disability is a health condition or impairment caused or made worse by military service. Disabilities are rated from 0 to 100 according to a rating schedule published in the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations, Title 38, and as determined by the Department of Veterans Affairs. For the purposes of benefits, these ratings are grouped in brackets: 10 percent or more, 30 percent or more, and 60 percent or more. Disabilities of 10 percent or more entitle a veteran to compensation.

### **HOW DO YOU CLAIM A DISABILITY?**

You need to submit a formal claim to your local VA Regional Office (VARO). This involves completing an application for compensation; signing medical release forms or providing your service medical records or other medical records that substantiate treatment by private doctors and hospitals. You'll also need to submit your DD-214 military discharge papers or a Statement of Service.

Your claim is assigned to a rating veterans service representative who may order a medical examination to be conducted by VA doctors, at no charge to you. The report and the results of any tests taken will be sent to your VARO and a decision will be rendered within three to six months. A favorable ruling will provide you with your percentage disability, the amount of compensation you'll be paid each month and the start date of the payments. If you were denied benefits or if you think the percentage evaluation or effective date is wrong, you can appeal to the adjudication board at your local VARO. It is highly recommended that you apply through a Veterans Service Officer (VSO) who is familiar with the procedures and requirements. The VVA has VSOs who can assist you.

### **TRANSITIONING WITH A DISABILITY**

The military offers aptitude testing and career counseling through the **Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP)**. A joint venture of the Departments of

Defense, VA, Transportation and the DOL's Veterans' Employment Training Services (VETS), DTAP offers free workshops to military personnel within 180 days of their separation or retirement. These three-day workshops, held at military installations nationwide, provide an overview of the job market, teach job-search and interview skills, and help in career decision-making, resume preparation and cover-letter writing. Disabled veterans are given additional hours of individual instruction and assessment to determine your specific needs and job readiness. Further assistance is offered to qualified disabled veterans through **Chapter 31, the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program (VR&E)**.

### **WHAT IS VR&E?**

This VA program is meant to help veterans who have service-connected disabilities to gain and keep suitable employment. Services are available for 48 months from time of enrollment in the program, and include:

- Educational, vocational, psychological, employment and personal adjustment counseling.
- Assessment of what jobs you are qualified for and able to perform.
- Training, on-the-job training and non-paid work experiences.
- Educational degree and certificate programs.
- Assistance in finding and support in keeping a job.
- Special employer incentives for hiring disabled veterans.
- Assistance with going into business.

VA offers veterans and their qualified dependents free assistance in choosing a career path and setting the course needed to get there. VR&E provides interest and aptitude testing, career exploration, goal setting, and assistance in finding educational, training and testing programs related to career goals.

### **HOW DO I APPLY FOR VR&E SERVICES?**

To enroll, you'll need to submit **VA Form 28-1900**, "Disabled Veterans Application For Vocational Rehabilitation." Veterans with a service-connected disability rating of 10 percent or more are eligible for VR&E services for 12 years from their date of discharge or their date of disability determination, whichever is later. To be eligible, you must also have received an honorable or other-than-dishonorable discharge, and be found by a VA vocational rehabilitation counselor to have either an Employment Handicap or a Serious Employment Handicap. VA defines those as follows:

- Employment Handicap -- an impairment of your ability to prepare for, obtain or retain employment consistent with your abilities, aptitudes, and interests. The impairment results in substantial part from a service-connected disability. For veterans rated at 20 percent or more, a finding of employment handicap results in a finding of "entitled."
- Serious Employment Handicap (SEH) -- a significant impairment of your ability to prepare for, obtain, or retain employment consistent with your abilities, aptitudes and interests. The SEH results in substantial part from a service-

connected disability. For veterans rated at 10 percent and for veterans whose 12-year period of basic eligibility has passed, the finding of an SEH is necessary to establish “entitlement.”

Once you are accepted to the program, your counselor/case manager will work with you to create an individualized vocational plan that will detail the type and amount of services you’ll receive under VR&E. Plans include:

- **Individualized Employment Assistance Plan (IEAP)** – 18 months of assistance intended to get you a job.
- **Individualized Extended Evaluation Plan (IEEP)** – 12 months or less of evaluation and assessment to determine if you can get and keep a job.
- **Individualized Written Rehabilitation Plan (IWRP)** – Up to 48 months of training or education, leading toward your setting of a job goal.
- **Individualized Independent Living Plan (IILP)** – Up to 24 months of services to enable you to live more independently within your family and community.

As you implement your plan, you’ll work with your counselor/case manager who will offer ongoing support and referral. Specialized employment services will also be provided by the case manager in coordination with DOL. Your state employment service centers employ **Disabled Veterans Outreach Placement (DVOP) Coordinators** who advocate for, assist and refer disabled veterans in finding local jobs, apprenticeships, training opportunities and on-the-job training.

One such training program is the **Compensated Work Therapy Program**, a partnership between VR&E and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). This program brings transitional and permanent jobs to veterans who may be returning to the workforce following medical rehabilitation. For eligible veterans, this partnership can provide vocational rehabilitation that combines work and training for new job skills.

## **EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS**

You can improve your marketability through higher education, degree and certificate programs, flight training, correspondence programs and apprenticeship/on-the-job training programs paid for by your VA educational benefit programs, including the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB). Actually a series of educational benefits, MGIB includes:

- **Full-time study benefits** – At current rates, you can receive \$985 a month for up to 36 months to pay for full-time study at colleges, trade or vocational schools. The money is direct-deposited into your personal account, providing that you verify your full-time student status for the VA by telephone or online via the Web Automated Verification of Enrollment (WAVE) every month. Because the payments are made to you monthly, they are considered income and not financial assistance; you may have to take out a student loan to pay the school in full each semester and then pay it down with your MGIB benefits.

(Note: Full-time study is considered 30 semester hours or 45 quarter hours in an academic year. This measure also qualifies as nine months of responsible experience time for civil service placement and can help you earn a higher grade/pay scale if you ultimately work for the government.)

- **Accelerated Payments** -- Vets enrolled in a high-tech program for eventual employment in a high tech industry as defined by the VA may receive a lump sum payment of 60 percent of tuition.
- **Licensing and Certification** -- If you pursue licensing or certification tests, MGIB can reimburse you for the test-taking fee, although not any other costs associated with it. The MGIB will pay for Microsoft Certified Professional (MCP) certification, FAA aircraft mechanics licensing, state licensing for nurses and other professions, and similar programs.
- **Top-Up Assistance** – Active-duty service persons can receive additional funds to cover the gap between what MGIB benefits pay and their actual tuition.
- **Veterans Educational Assistance Program (VEAP)** – A savings plan that enables you to make pre-tax contributions from your salary directly to an educational fund. The government will deposit \$2 for every \$1 you save in the account.
- **Work-Study** -- Any veteran attending school three-quarter time or more may work at the school veterans office, VA Regional Office, VA medical facilities, or at approved state employment offices. Jobs pay minimum wage.
- **Survivors and Dependents Education Assistance (DEA)** -- This program offers 45 months of education benefits for spouses or dependent children of veterans who are permanently and totally disabled due to a service-related condition, or who died while on active duty or as a result of a service related condition.

Qualified VR&E applicants may be entitled to additional tutoring services.

To qualify, you must have served three continuous years of activity duty, received a fully honorable discharge and either completed high school, secured a General Equivalency Diploma (GED), or earned 12 credits toward your college degree before applying for the benefit. You have 10 years from the date of your last separation to apply for up to \$35,460 in total benefits – depending on the educational program you choose, your length of service, your category (See “MGIB Categories”) and, of course, whether you completed the proper forms at the time of your enrollment. You can apply for MGIB benefits by completing **VA Form 22-1990**, “Application for VA Education Benefits.”

## **MGIB CATEGORIES**

In addition to the requirements above, you must meet requirements from one of the four categories below. If you entered active duty before July 1, 1985, you may only qualify under Categories 2, 3, or 4 (as posted on [www.military.com](http://www.military.com))

### **CATEGORY I**

- Entered active duty for the first time after June 30, 1985.
- Had military pay reduced by \$100 a month for first 12 months.
- Continuously served for 3 years, OR 2 years if that is what you first enlisted for, OR 2 years if you entered Selected Reserve within a year of leaving active duty and served 4 years (“2 by 4” Program).

### **CATEGORY II**

- Entered active duty before January 1, 1977.
- Served at least 1 day between 10/19/84 and 6/30/85, and stayed on active duty through 6/30/88 (or 6/30/87 if you entered Selected Reserve within 1 year of leaving active duty and served 4 years).
- On 12/31/89, you had entitlement left from Vietnam Era GI Bill.

### **CATEGORY III**

- Not eligible for MGIB under Category I or II.
- On active duty on 9/30/90 AND separated involuntarily after 2/2/91.
- OR involuntarily separated on or after 11/30/93.
- OR voluntarily separated under either the Voluntary Separation Incentive (VSI) or Special Separation Benefit (SSB) program.
- Before separation, you had military pay reduced by \$1,200.

### **CATEGORY IV**

- On active duty on 10/9/96 AND you had money remaining in a VEAP account on that date AND you elected MGIB by 10/9/97.
- OR entered full-time National Guard duty under Title 32, USC, between 7/1/85, and 11/28/89 AND you elected MGIB during the period 10/9/96 through 7/8/97.
- Had military pay reduced by \$100 a month for 12 months or made a \$1,200 lump-sum contribution.

## **INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM**

If VA staff determine that the severity of your injuries make employment impossible, you may be entitled to Independent Living Services (ILP) under VR&E. You may request consideration for the program after first applying for VR&E services and undergoing an assessment with VA staff.

Under ILP, you, your family, your VA counselor and your medical professionals will create a plan that is customized to your specific needs and intended to enable you to live

as independently as possible. Your plan may ultimately include assistive technology, skills training, and/or connection to community-based support services.

### **SEEKING FEDERAL EMPLOYMENT**

The federal government provides special considerations and advantages to disabled veterans over other groups in applying for jobs. Disabled veterans can qualify for an additional 10 points in their ranking when applying for federal jobs. Similar considerations are provided to those seeking state and local municipal civil service positions.

To qualify for this 10-point Disabled Veterans' Preference, you need to prove the extent of your disability to become eligible in one of three categories (**CP**, **CPS** or **XP**) as follows:

- **Compensable Disability Preference (CP)** - Have a compensable service-connected disability rating of at least 10 percent but less than 30 percent.
- **30 Percent Compensable Disability Preference (CPS)** - Have a compensable service-connected disability rating of 30 percent or more.
- **Disability Preference (XP)** -- Have a present service-connected disability or be receiving compensation disability retirement benefits or pension from the military or the Department of Veterans Affairs, although not qualifying as a CP or a CPS, or have received a Purple Heart.

Further, 10-point preferences are available to:

- The spouse of a veteran unable to work because of a service-connected disability.
- The unmarried widow of certain deceased veterans.
- The mother of a veteran who died in service or who is permanently and totally disabled.

### **CLAIMING PREFERENCES**

Once you know which preference you're eligible for, you have to claim it. No surprise, but in the government you cannot receive a Veterans' Preference if you don't produce the proper documentation.

- Since preference must be claimed when you *apply* for a position, your resume is among the best weapons in your arsenal. Be sure to include a description of your service, including your rank, branch, affiliation, years served and location and nature of your service. Claim your preference under your work experience (sample wording: "Veterans' Preference: I am eligible for a 10-point Disabled Veterans' Preference.") In lieu of a resume, you may complete OPM form **OF-612**, "Optional Application for Federal Employment," and indicate that you are claiming a 10-point Disabled Veterans' Preference.
- Provide copies of your discharge papers (**DD-214** or a Statement of Service) and documentation of any medals or commendations you received.

- Disabled veterans must provide further documentation from the military or the VA that proves that you are certified as having a service-connected disability (at 10 percent or more), that you are receiving compensation for a service-connected disability, or that you were awarded the Purple Heart for wounds or injuries incurred during action. If seeking to claim the 10-point preference, you must additionally complete **SF 15**, “Application for a 10-Point Veterans’ Preference.” If you are applying for preference as a 30 percent disabled veteran, your paperwork must prove that you are disabled at 30 percent.
- For the spouse, widow or mother of a veteran seeking a derived preference, you’ll need to provide documentation from the military or the VA that proves that the related veteran has a service-connected disability, states the percentage of that disability, notes whether the veteran is considered by the agency as unemployable, and states whether the service-connected disability is considered permanent and total. Widows must produce the death certificate or official notice of death under honorable conditions. Family members should also be prepared with marriage certificates and birth certificates to prove legal relation.

Military and VA documentation must have been issued within the 12 months prior to seeking the preference.

### **SPECIAL HIRING AUTHORITIES**

Congress created special hiring authorities, which are types of civil service shortcuts that let agencies hire veterans directly with minimal red tape: **VRA, 30 Percent Disabled** and **VEOA**.

**Veterans Recruitment Appointment (VRA)**, formerly the Veterans Readjustment Appointment, allows agencies to appoint you to certain positions in the civil service without competing. If you stay in that position and exhibit satisfactory performance for two years, you will be converted to civil service.

Under another special hiring authority, veterans who are **30 percent or more disabled** can request a temporary placement in a civil service position, which can lead to a permanent civil service placement if you perform well.

**The Veterans Employment Opportunities Act (VEOA)** of 1998 enables veterans to compete as a non-federal employee against current federal employees in the civil service system. If selected, you will be given a career or a career-conditional appointment.

Further details about special hiring authorities and required documentation can be found in the *Vietnam Veterans of America Guide to Veterans’ Preference*. That guide further explains how to qualify for a 10-point preference, and how to write your resumes to claim your preferences and improve your ranking in keyword searches.

## VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION RESOURCES:

**Disability Ratings**, schedule under Title 38

[http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/waisidx\\_03/38cfr4\\_03.html](http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/waisidx_03/38cfr4_03.html)

**Claiming a Disability** – Call VA at 800-827-1000 for **Form 21-526**, Veterans Application for Compensation or Pension, or use Veterans Online Applications (**VONAPP**) to apply for compensation, pension, vocational rehabilitation, educational and health benefits via the Internet at

<http://vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp/main.asp>

**Disabled Transition Assistance Program** – Call 866-4-USA-DOL (TTY: 877-889-5267) or on the web at <http://www.dol.gov/vets>

**Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment (VR&E)** benefits overview online:

<http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/index.htm>

**VA Work-Study Opportunities** – Call: 888-442-4551.

**Montgomery GI Bill** and educational benefits call 888-GI-BILL-1 (888-442-4551)

or visit: <http://www.gibill.va.gov/>. For required forms, visit

<http://www.vba.va.gov/pubs/educationforms.htm>

**Vets Guide** on preference, published by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM)

<http://www.opm.gov/veterans/html/vetguide.asp>

**A Guide to Veterans Preference in State Government**

<http://www.vfwdc.org/NVEO/guide.htm>

**Forms Library**

**Form 21-526**, “Veterans Application for Compensation or Pension”

<http://www.vba.va.gov/pubs/candpforms>

**SF 15**, “Application for a 10-Point Veterans Preference”

<http://www.opm.gov/forms/pdfimage/sf0015.pdf>

**OF-612**, “Optional Application for Federal Employment”

<http://www.opm.gov/forms/html/of.asp>

**VA Form 28-1900**, “Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Application”

<http://www.vba.va.gov/pubs/vreforms.htm>

**VA Form 22-1990** “Application for VA Education Benefits”

<http://www.vba.va.gov/pubs/educationforms.htm>

**DD-214** -- If you’ve lost your original DD-214 and have received disability or education benefits, the VA may have a copy on file. At the very least, if you are currently receiving benefits the VA should be able to provide a Statement of Service, which can be used instead of a DD-214.

**Job Banks**

Chapter 31 National on-line job bank:  
<http://dva.jobsearch.org/>

**America's Job Bank** – a DOL database of jobs nationwide.  
<http://www.ajb.dni.us/>

**USAJOBS** –The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) maintains a searchable database that you can access via the Internet at <http://www.usajobs.opm.gov> or call 703-724-1850 (TDD 978-461-8404).

### **Department of Labor Resources**

Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) office in your state. You can find this in the government pages of your local phone book or by searching: <http://www.dol.gov/vets/aboutvets/contacts/main.htm>

**Occupational Outlooks** provide details about hundreds of job types and opportunities:  
<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocoiab.htm>

**Veterans Preference Advisor** – an online quiz to help you determine your preference-eligible status at <http://www.dol.gov/elaws/vetspref.htm>  
You can also check your status with a veterans' representative at your state employment services.

### **Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Resources**

**OPM website:** <http://www.opm.gov/> or call 202-606-1800 (TTY 202-606-2532).

**Veterans' Information,** including guides explaining the federal government benefits for veterans and its disabled veteran's affirmative action program plans.  
<http://www.opm.gov/veterans/>

### **Department of Veterans Affairs Resources**

Department of Veterans Affairs website: <http://www.va.gov/> or call 800-827-1000.

To locate a **VA office** near you, visit the online locator at:  
[http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/regional\\_offices.htm](http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/regional_offices.htm)

**Board of Veterans Appeals** adjudicates claims that could not be resolved at the VARO, VA medical center or other VA office level. The website also offers a guide called "Understanding the Appeal Process" at <http://www.va.gov/vbs/bva/>

*“Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another”*

**Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA)** is a not-for-profit veterans service organization chartered by Congress whose mission is to improve the benefits, health, well-being, employment prospects and public support for American veterans from all branches of the military. VVA provides veterans with a voice in the corridors of Congress and among those government agencies that regulate and distribute veterans’ benefits and services. Further, VVA also provides individual veterans with the resources, services and support to maximize the opportunities made available to them by law.

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