

Veterans Law Basics: Identifying Issues and Exploring Career Opportunities

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Session Objectives

- Identify common veteran-specific legal issues
- Understand the VA disability compensation system
- Identify common legal issues within the disability claims process
- Guide leads/clients to credible resources
- Explore career paths in veterans law



Why Veterans Law Matters

- 18 million living U.S. veterans
- **Complex and often misunderstood benefits system**
- Paralegals as frontline support in identifying and referring issues

Spotting Veteran- Specific Legal Issues

Disability and/or Pension
Compensation

Overpayments and Debt
Collection

Discharge Upgrades

Access to VA healthcare

Housing and Homelessness

What Is the VA Disability Compensation Program?

Tax-free monthly
payments

For service-connected
injuries or illnesses

Rating system from 0–
100%

Based on severity and
impact on employability

What Qualifies as a “Service Connected” Disability?

Direct service connection

Secondary service connection

Presumptive service connection (e.g., Agent Orange)

Aggravation of a preexisting condition

Components of a Successful VA Claim



Current medical diagnosis



In-service event, injury, or illness



Nexus (medical link between service and current condition)



Supporting evidence
(medical and lay statements)

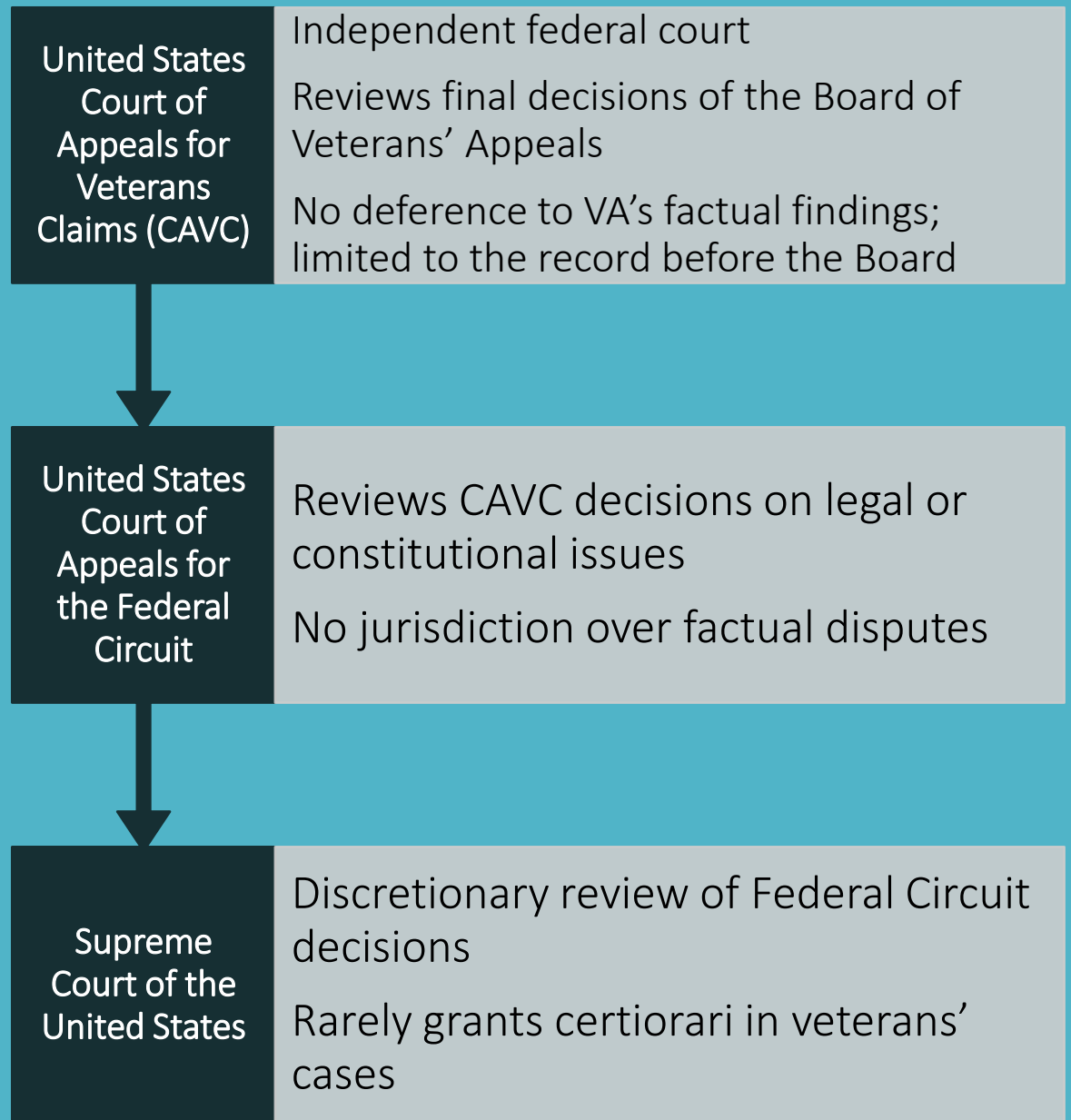
Appealing a Denial

Generally, there are three options under the new system, the Appeals Modernization Act (“AMA”):

1. Supplemental Claim (VA Form 20-0995)
2. Higher-Level Review (VA Form 20-0996)
3. Board Appeal (VA Form 10182)

There are extremely important timeline and strategic considerations when choosing one of these options.

Next steps if the Veteran is continuously denied?



Common Issues in Veterans Disability Claims

Frequent VA errors:

- Wrong effective dates

- Low disability ratings

- Ignored favorable evidence

- Inadequate VA exams

- Missed appeal deadlines or filing errors

Relevant Law & Resources

Veterans Benefits Manual (VBM) – published on LexisNexis. A great starting point for understanding any concept related to VA issues.

Statutes - Title 38, Chapter 38 of the United States Code (U.S.C.)

Regulations - Title 38 Code of Federal Regulations (C.F.R.)

Case law – Supreme Court, Fed. Cir., CAVC

M21-1 Adjudication Procedures Manual used by VA employees

TDIU and Mental Health Claims

- TDIU: Total Disability based on Individual Unemployability
- Mental health claims require careful documentation
- Special considerations for PTSD and MST (Military Sexual Trauma)

Helping Clients Beyond Legal Work

- Recognize signs a veteran may need VA benefits help. Many veterans may not understand the extent of benefits they may be entitled to.
- Recognize signs of **PTSD, MST, TBI**, and other service-related issues that may affect how veterans engage with legal systems or services. Listen for language indicating suicidal ideations.
- Recommend reliable VSOs or legal aid.
- Use plain language when explaining legal concepts.

Trusted Resources for Veterans

- Accredited attorneys and agents directory
- VA.gov and eBenefits (however, even these can show inaccurate info)
- Veterans Service Organizations (e.g., DAV, VFW, AMVETS)
- Legal aid and pro bono clinics
- Red flags to be aware of: “claims sharks” and inaccurate advice/information from youtubers and blogs

Careers in Veterans Law



Law firms focusing on VA claims



Nonprofit and advocacy roles



Government positions (VA, VBA, etc.)



Remote work and growing tele-practice options

Key considerations before entering the veterans law world



Can be the most rewarding career



Patience is especially important



You must be a good listener and communicator



Learn how to set realistic expectations and be comfortable with giving bad news... very frequently



Set healthy boundaries with clients (learn to say “no” confidently)



Great career for those who love “treasure hunting”

VA Accreditation

Benefits of becoming an accredited agent:

- Legal authorization to represent veterans
- Ability to charge fees once in the appeal process
- Access to VBMS
- Professional Recognition and Trust
- Listing in VA's directory

Getting VA Accredited

Who can become accredited:
attorneys, agents, VSOs

Application process and exam (38
CFR § 14.629)

Continuing education
requirements

Where to apply:
www.va.gov/ogc/accreditation.asp

Professional Development Opportunities

1. NOVA (National Organization of Veterans' Advocates)
2. Federal Bar Association: Veterans Law Section
3. Other State Bar associations and CAVC Bar
4. Online CLEs and certification courses

Questions?