

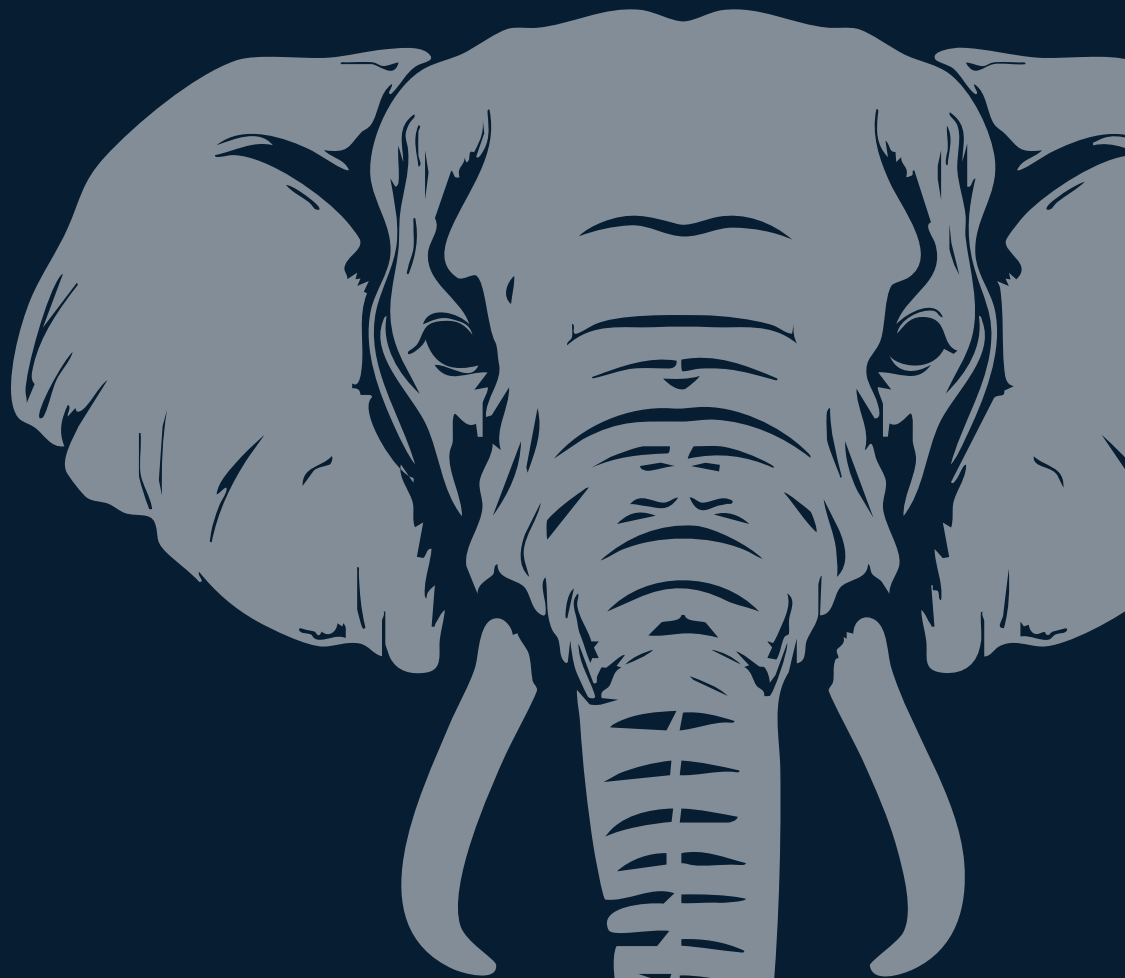
CORCORAN SMITH LAW  
CALIFORNIA ATTORNEYS

VETERANS DISABILITY COMPENSATION

# How to File a VA Disability Claim

*An 8-step guide for veterans navigating the VA disability compensation system, from your first VA.gov login to the Regional Office decision letter.*

FOUNDED BY AN ARMY COMBAT VETERAN · CALIFORNIA STATEWIDE



## WHY THIS GUIDE

# The VA system was not built for veterans to navigate alone.

Most denied or underrated decisions can be appealed, but only if you act inside the deadlines and assemble the right evidence.

Corcoran Smith Law was founded by an Army combat veteran. We focus on representing veterans who have received a VA rating decision and were either denied or underrated within the past twelve months, or who have an ongoing appeal with the Board or the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (CAVC). This guide walks through the 8-step process the VA uses to evaluate a disability claim, so you know what is happening at each stage and where the common pitfalls are.

---

**INSIDE THIS GUIDE**

*The 8-step VA disability claim process, fee structure for veteran representation (you don't pay out of pocket), and how to escalate a denied or underrated decision.*

---

**12-MONTH WINDOW**

*If your VA rating decision is wrong (denied or underrated) you generally have one year from the decision date to preserve your appeal rights. Don't let the clock run out.*

## THE PROCESS

# 8 steps to file a VA disability claim

Steps 1 through 4: preparing your claim.

STEP

01

## Create or access your VA.gov account

The VA retired the eBenefits portal and consolidated everything into VA.gov. Set up or confirm access at [va.gov/sign-in](https://va.gov/sign-in) using Login.gov or ID.me. This is where you will file, track, and communicate about your claim.

STEP

02

## Confirm basic eligibility for disability compensation

You must have served on active duty, active duty for training, or inactive duty training, and you must have a current disability that is connected to your service. Both conditions are required.

STEP

03

## Initiate your disability claim

Submit VA Form 21-526EZ online to lock in your effective date, the date that determines when your benefits start and how much retroactive pay you receive. If you cannot file online today, file VA Form 21-0966 Intent to File first to preserve the date.

STEP

04

## Gather your supporting documents and evidence

Collect medical records, service records, and any documents that show your disability is connected to your service. Supporting documents are helpful but not required to file.

## THE PROCESS

# 8 steps to file a VA disability claim

Steps 5 through 8: submitting your claim and reviewing the decision.

STEP

05

## Complete and submit VA Form 21-526EZ

Submit through the VA.gov online portal, by mail to the Claims Intake Center at PO Box 4444, Janesville, WI 53547-4444, or in person at a VA regional office. Online submission is fastest and easiest to track.

STEP

06

## Attend your Compensation & Pension (C&P) exams

The VA will schedule one or more exams to evaluate your disability. Attending every appointment is critical. Missing a C&P exam is one of the most common reasons claims are denied.

STEP

07

## Wait for the Regional Office decision

The Regional Office reviews your claim and exam results to determine eligibility and your disability rating. The process takes several months. You can track status on VA.gov or by calling 1-800-827-1000.

STEP

08

## Review the Regional Office decision letter

You will receive a letter outlining the decision, your disability rating, and your benefits. If you disagree, you can file a Supplemental Claim, request a Higher-Level Review, or file a Board Appeal. Each preserves different rights and timelines.

## HOW WE GET PAID

# Veteran representation, no out-of-pocket cost

Federal law tightly regulates how attorneys may charge veterans for VA disability work.

## Regional Office & Board level

We work on a contingency basis: 20% of any awarded past-due benefits. No award, no fee.

## Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (CAVC)

Under the Equal Access to Justice Act (EAJA), the federal government covers our legal fees when we prevail at the CAVC.

## IF YOU DISAGREE

# Your three appeal paths after a Regional Office decision

## Supplemental Claim

File new and relevant evidence the VA hasn't already reviewed. Best when you have additional medical records, lay statements, or other new evidence to add.

## Higher-Level Review

Ask a more senior VA reviewer to take a fresh look at the existing record. No new evidence is allowed, but a senior reviewer can correct legal or factual errors in the original decision.

## Board Appeal

Take your case directly to the Board of Veterans' Appeals. Three lanes are available (direct review, evidence submission, or hearing) depending on whether you want to add evidence or testify before a Veterans Law Judge.

---

**STRICT DEADLINES**

*Each appeal type has its own filing deadline and procedural rules. Talk to a veteran-disability attorney before choosing a path. picking the wrong lane can cost you years of retroactive benefits.*

## YOUR NEXT STEP

# What to bring to a free consultation

Bring whatever you have. We will work through the rest together.

- ✓ Your most recent VA rating decision letter
- ✓ DD-214 or other discharge documents
- ✓ Medical records related to the claimed conditions
- ✓ Service treatment records (if you have them)
- ✓ Any C&P exam reports
- ✓ Lay statements from family or fellow service members
- ✓ Notes on appointments you missed and why
- ✓ List of conditions you believe are service-connected

---

## VETERAN-LED REPRESENTATION

*Corcoran Smith Law was founded by an Army combat veteran. We know the VA system from both sides: as veterans who have used it and as attorneys who have fought it. Free initial consultations for any veteran who has received a denied or underrated rating in the last twelve months, or who has an ongoing appeal at the Board or CAVC.*

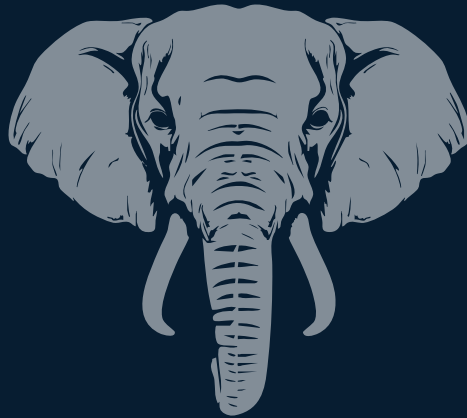
---

## SCHEDULE YOUR CONSULTATION

*Call (415) 275-1492 or visit [corcoransmithlaw.com](http://corcoransmithlaw.com) to schedule a free initial consultation. We accept clients statewide in California.*

---

This guide is for general informational purposes only and is not legal advice. Reading or downloading it does not create an attorney-client relationship with Corcoran Smith Law. Consult a licensed California attorney about your specific circumstances before acting on any information here.



# Corcoran Smith Law

*Free initial consultation. Flat-fee, contingency, and hybrid engagement options.*

## PHONE

(415) 275-1492

## MAILING

548 Market Street, PMB 537318  
San Francisco, CA 94104-5401

## WEB

[corcoransmithlaw.com](http://corcoransmithlaw.com)