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(2) *Evidence from a private physician or layman.* The date of receipt of such evidence will be accepted when the evidence furnished by or in behalf of the claimant is within the competence of the physician or lay person and shows the reasonable probability of entitlement to benefits.

(3) *State and other institutions.* When submitted by or on behalf of the veteran and entitlement is shown, date of receipt by the Department of Veterans Affairs of examination reports, clinical records, and transcripts of records will be accepted as the date of receipt of a claim if received from State, county, municipal, recognized private institutions, or other Government hospitals (except those described in paragraph (b)(1) of this section). These records must be authenticated by an appropriate official of the institution. Benefits will be granted if the records are adequate for rating purposes; otherwise findings will be verified by official examination. Reports received from private institutions not listed by the American Hospital Association must be certified by the Chief Medical Officer of the Department of Veterans Affairs or physician designee.

[26 FR 1571, Feb. 24, 1961, as amended at 27 FR 4421, May 9, 1962; 31 FR 12055, Sept. 15, 1966; 40 FR 56434, Dec. 3, 1975; 52 FR 27340, July 21, 1987; 60 FR 27409, May 24, 1995]

§ 3.158 Abandoned claims.

(a) *General.* Except as provided in § 3.652 of this part, where evidence requested in connection with an original claim, a claim for increase or to reopen or for the purpose of determining continued entitlement is not furnished within 1 year after the date of request, the claim will be considered abandoned. After the expiration of 1 year, further action will not be taken unless a new claim is received. Should the right to benefits be finally established, pension, compensation, dependency and indemnity compensation, or monetary allowance under the provisions of 38 U.S.C. chapter 18 based on such evidence shall commence not earlier than the date of filing the new claim.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 501)

(b) *Department of Veterans Affairs examinations.* Where the veteran fails

without adequate reason to respond to an order to report for Department of Veterans Affairs examination within 1 year from the date of request and payments have been discontinued, the claim for such benefits will be considered abandoned.

(c) *Disappearance.* Where payments of pension, compensation, dependency and indemnity compensation, or monetary allowance under the provisions of 38 U.S.C. chapter 18 have not been made or have been discontinued because a payee's present whereabouts is unknown, payments will be resumed effective the day following the date of last payment if entitlement is otherwise established, upon receipt of a valid current address.

CROSS REFERENCES: Periodic certification of continued eligibility. See § 3.652. Failure to report for VA examination. See § 3.655. Disappearance of veteran. See § 3.656.

[27 FR 11887, Dec. 1, 1962, as amended at 28 FR 13362, Dec. 10, 1963; 52 FR 43063, Nov. 9, 1987; 62 FR 51278, Sept. 30, 1997; 67 FR 49586, July 31, 2002]

§ 3.159 Department of Veterans Affairs assistance in developing claims.

(a) *Definitions.* For purposes of this section, the following definitions apply:

(1) *Competent medical evidence* means evidence provided by a person who is qualified through education, training, or experience to offer medical diagnoses, statements, or opinions. Competent medical evidence may also mean statements conveying sound medical principles found in medical treatises. It would also include statements contained in authoritative writings such as medical and scientific articles and research reports or analyses.

(2) *Competent lay evidence* means any evidence not requiring that the proponent have specialized education, training, or experience. Lay evidence is competent if it is provided by a person who has knowledge of facts or circumstances and conveys matters that can be observed and described by a lay person.

(3) *Substantially complete application* means an application containing the

claimant's name; his or her relationship to the veteran, if applicable; sufficient service information for VA to verify the claimed service, if applicable; the benefit claimed and any medical condition(s) on which it is based; the claimant's signature; and in claims for nonservice-connected disability or death pension and parents' dependency and indemnity compensation, a statement of income.

(4) For purposes of paragraph (c)(4)(i) of this section, *event* means one or more incidents associated with places, types, and circumstances of service giving rise to disability.

(5) *Information* means non-evidentiary facts, such as the claimant's Social Security number or address; the name and military unit of a person who served with the veteran; or the name and address of a medical care provider who may have evidence pertinent to the claim.

(b) *VA's duty to notify claimants of necessary information or evidence.* (1) When VA receives a complete or substantially complete application for benefits, it will notify the claimant of any information and medical or lay evidence that is necessary to substantiate the claim. VA will inform the claimant which information and evidence, if any, that the claimant is to provide to VA and which information and evidence, if any, that VA will attempt to obtain on behalf of the claimant. VA will also request that the claimant provide any evidence in the claimant's possession that pertains to the claim. If VA does not receive the necessary information and evidence requested from the claimant within one year of the date of the notice, VA cannot pay or provide any benefits based on that application. If the claimant has not responded to the request within 30 days, VA may decide the claim prior to the expiration of the one-year period based on all the information and evidence contained in the file, including information and evidence it has obtained on behalf of the claimant and any VA medical examinations or medical opinions. If VA does so, however, and the claimant subsequently provides the information and evidence

within one year of the date of the request, VA must readjudicate the claim.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103)

(2) If VA receives an incomplete application for benefits, it will notify the claimant of the information necessary to complete the application and will defer assistance until the claimant submits this information.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5102(b), 5103A(3))

(c) *VA's duty to assist claimants in obtaining evidence.* Upon receipt of a substantially complete application for benefits, VA will make reasonable efforts to help a claimant obtain evidence necessary to substantiate the claim. In addition, VA will give the assistance described in paragraphs (c)(1), (c)(2), and (c)(3) to an individual attempting to reopen a finally decided claim. VA will not pay any fees charged by a custodian to provide records requested.

(1) *Obtaining records not in the custody of a Federal department or agency.* VA will make reasonable efforts to obtain relevant records not in the custody of a Federal department or agency, to include records from State or local governments, private medical care providers, current or former employers, and other non-Federal governmental sources. Such reasonable efforts will generally consist of an initial request for the records and, if the records are not received, at least one follow-up request. A follow-up request is not required if a response to the initial request indicates that the records sought do not exist or that a follow-up request for the records would be futile. If VA receives information showing that subsequent requests to this or another custodian could result in obtaining the records sought, then reasonable efforts will include an initial request and, if the records are not received, at least one follow-up request to the new source or an additional request to the original source.

(i) The claimant must cooperate fully with VA's reasonable efforts to obtain relevant records from non-Federal agency or department custodians. The

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claimant must provide enough information to identify and locate the existing records, including the person, company, agency, or other custodian holding the records; the approximate time frame covered by the records; and, in the case of medical treatment records, the condition for which treatment was provided.

(ii) If necessary, the claimant must authorize the release of existing records in a form acceptable to the person, company, agency, or other custodian holding the records.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103A(b))

(2) *Obtaining records in the custody of a Federal department or agency.* VA will make as many requests as are necessary to obtain relevant records from a Federal department or agency. These records include but are not limited to military records, including service medical records; medical and other records from VA medical facilities; records from non-VA facilities providing examination or treatment at VA expense; and records from other Federal agencies, such as the Social Security Administration. VA will end its efforts to obtain records from a Federal department or agency only if VA concludes that the records sought do not exist or that further efforts to obtain those records would be futile. Cases in which VA may conclude that no further efforts are required include those in which the Federal department or agency advises VA that the requested records do not exist or the custodian does not have them.

(i) The claimant must cooperate fully with VA's reasonable efforts to obtain relevant records from Federal agency or department custodians. If requested by VA, the claimant must provide enough information to identify and locate the existing records, including the custodian or agency holding the records; the approximate time frame covered by the records; and, in the case of medical treatment records, the condition for which treatment was provided. In the case of records requested to corroborate a claimed stressful event in service, the claimant must provide information sufficient for the records custodian to conduct a search of the corroborative records.

(ii) If necessary, the claimant must authorize the release of existing records in a form acceptable to the custodian or agency holding the records.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103A(b))

(3) *Obtaining records in compensation claims.* In a claim for disability compensation, VA will make efforts to obtain the claimant's service medical records, if relevant to the claim; other relevant records pertaining to the claimant's active military, naval or air service that are held or maintained by a governmental entity; VA medical records or records of examination or treatment at non-VA facilities authorized by VA; and any other relevant records held by any Federal department or agency. The claimant must provide enough information to identify and locate the existing records including the custodian or agency holding the records; the approximate time frame covered by the records; and, in the case of medical treatment records, the condition for which treatment was provided.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103A(c))

(4) *Providing medical examinations or obtaining medical opinions.* (i) In a claim for disability compensation, VA will provide a medical examination or obtain a medical opinion based upon a review of the evidence of record if VA determines it is necessary to decide the claim. A medical examination or medical opinion is necessary if the information and evidence of record does not contain sufficient competent medical evidence to decide the claim, but:

(A) Contains competent lay or medical evidence of a current diagnosed disability or persistent or recurrent symptoms of disability;

(B) Establishes that the veteran suffered an event, injury or disease in service, or has a disease or symptoms of a disease listed in § 3.309, § 3.313, § 3.316, and § 3.317 manifesting during an applicable presumptive period provided the claimant has the required service or triggering event to qualify for that presumption; and

(C) Indicates that the claimed disability or symptoms may be associated with the established event, injury, or

disease in service or with another service-connected disability.

(ii) Paragraph (4)(i)(C) could be satisfied by competent evidence showing post-service treatment for a condition, or other possible association with military service.

(iii) Paragraph (c)(4) applies to a claim to reopen a finally adjudicated claim only if new and material evidence is presented or secured.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103A(d))

(d) *Circumstances where VA will refrain from or discontinue providing assistance.* VA will refrain from providing assistance in obtaining evidence for a claim if the substantially complete application for benefits indicates that there is no reasonable possibility that any assistance VA would provide to the claimant would substantiate the claim. VA will discontinue providing assistance in obtaining evidence for a claim if the evidence obtained indicates that there is no reasonable possibility that further assistance would substantiate the claim. Circumstances in which VA will refrain from or discontinue providing assistance in obtaining evidence include, but are not limited to:

(1) The claimant's ineligibility for the benefit sought because of lack of qualifying service, lack of veteran status, or other lack of legal eligibility;

(2) Claims that are inherently incredible or clearly lack merit; and

(3) An application requesting a benefit to which the claimant is not entitled as a matter of law.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103A(a)(2))

(e) *Duty to notify claimant of inability to obtain records.* (1) If VA makes reasonable efforts to obtain relevant non-Federal records but is unable to obtain them, or after continued efforts to obtain Federal records concludes that it is reasonably certain they do not exist or further efforts to obtain them would be futile, VA will provide the claimant with oral or written notice of that fact. VA will make a record of any oral notice conveyed to the claimant. For non-Federal records requests, VA may provide the notice at the same time it makes its final attempt to obtain the relevant records. In either case, the no-

tice must contain the following information:

(i) The identity of the records VA was unable to obtain;

(ii) An explanation of the efforts VA made to obtain the records;

(iii) A description of any further action VA will take regarding the claim, including, but not limited to, notice that VA will decide the claim based on the evidence of record unless the claimant submits the records VA was unable to obtain; and

(iv) A notice that the claimant is ultimately responsible for providing the evidence.

(2) If VA becomes aware of the existence of relevant records before deciding the claim, VA will notify the claimant of the records and request that the claimant provide a release for the records. If the claimant does not provide any necessary release of the relevant records that VA is unable to obtain, VA will request that the claimant obtain the records and provide them to VA.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5103A(b)(2))

(f) For the purpose of the notice requirements in paragraphs (b) and (e) of this section, notice to the claimant means notice to the claimant or his or her fiduciary, if any, as well as to his or her representative, if any.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5102(b), 5103(a))

[66 FR 45630, Aug. 29, 2001]

§ 3.160 Status of claims.

The following definitions are applicable to claims for pension, compensation, and dependency and indemnity compensation.

(a) *Informal claim.* See § 3.155.

(b) *Original claim.* An initial formal application on a form prescribed by the Secretary. (See §§ 3.151, 3.152).

(c) *Pending claim.* An application, formal or informal, which has not been finally adjudicated.

(d) *Finally adjudicated claim.* An application, formal or informal, which has been allowed or disallowed by the agency of original jurisdiction, the action having become final by the expiration of 1 year after the date of notice of an award or disallowance, or by denial on