

VFW Service Officers Train to Navigate VA Bureaucracy so You Don't Have To

VFW's VA Accredited Service Officers undergo extensive training each year and are held to a higher standard than required by VA

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Twice each year, hundreds of VFW Accredited Service Officers from around the world attend a week-long course in Annapolis, Maryland. The training is necessary for many reasons, but VFW National Veterans Service Director Michael Figlioli said it is important for all VFW service officers to be up-to-date on VA policy changes or new laws passed regarding veterans' benefits.

Figlioli added that VFW service officers attend these training conferences to develop the skills necessary to help veterans obtain their earned VA benefits. VA requires accredited service officers to spend at least 40 hours each year in training.

Figlioli said that he wants his team to be the most qualified team possible.

VFW offers up to 80 hours for its service officers each year.

"VFW continues to provide over and above the minimum requirement for accreditation by holding two in-person meetings each year with a virtual option," Figlioli said. "There also is an accountability component as outlined in the NVS Policy and Procedure that VFW-accredited representatives must maintain a 70 percent academic average, which aligns with VA standards for accreditation."

MORE THAN JUST DISABILITY CLAIMS

Figlioli said that VFW's network of more than 2,000 service officers is committed to life-long advocacy for all veterans who work with one of VFW's Accredited Service Officers.

"Our representatives are representing that client from the moment they file a disability claim, through a review of the VA's decision," Figlioli said. "VFW also files any appeals

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necessary for the veteran or family member to receive the maximum benefit allowed.”

Figlioli said VFW service officers’ work on disability claims does not end with VA disability claims. Service officers must be knowledgeable on topics such as the GI Bill and VA health care, home loans and other VA benefits and services. Service officers also can help clients with National Cemetery Administration benefits and state and county benefits as well.

“It does not matter if you are a member of the VFW or not — we are here to help” Figlioli said. “VFW will never charge a fee for assisting a veteran, their spouse or family member in filing a claim.”

According to a VFW bylaw, Posts are required to appoint a Post service officer.

Figlioli said that Post service officers typically are not VA-accredited but are available to assist veterans with disability claims and then turn over the completed paperwork to a Department Service Officer who is required to be VA-accredited. The DSO will then review the records and submit them to the VA.

“Any VFW member who is a fulltime employee of their Department is eligible to be accredited as a DSO, assistant service officer or claims consultant,” Figlioli said.

‘I’M HELPING GUIDE OTHERS’

Belinda Boldoe, an Army veteran, is an appeals officer who assists veterans at the Georgia Department of Veterans Service. She also is the service officer with the VFW Department of Georgia.

Boldoe said it is her goal to explain the process of filing a VA disability claim to everyone she helps. She added that she assists with about 25 VA disability claims per month.

“We’ve been seeing a lot more claims due to the passage of the PACT Act,” Boldoe said.

“Most of the claims are respiratory related from veterans of the Persian Gulf War through the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. We also get many claims from Vietnam War veterans who have hypertension related to Agent Orange exposure.”

Boldoe recalled when she tried to file a disability claim with VA, that she had no one to help her through the process.

“There was no guidance, and I messed up my claim,” Boldoe said. “When I saw the posting for the job I have right now, I knew that’s what I had to do. I was able to learn the process for myself, and I’m helping guide others, so they don’t make the same mistakes I made filing a claim.”

VFW Department of Michigan Service Officer Sidney Love said he became a VFW service

officer for a similar reason. The retired Air Force master sergeant said he wanted to become a VA-accredited service officer after VA denied his disability claim related to his cervical spine injury.

“When I read the decision that they didn’t see anything in my records for my cervical spine, I knew something was seriously flawed in the process,” said Love, a veteran of the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq wars. “I was receiving treatment for my lower back and cervical areas three times a week, for the last nine months of service, before I retired from the Air Force in April 2007.”

‘A WONDERFUL DECISION’

Love, who also served in South Korea in 1994 and 2003, said that after receiving the results, he met with a VFW Accredited Service Officer, who Love said “just so happened” to have a job opening for a veterans service officer.

“I was in the process of completing my [master of business administration degree], and I knew if something so obviously flawed happened with my claim, it was likely happening to other veterans with less tangible documented proof,” Love said. “I immediately realized the necessary impact of becoming a proficient [veterans service officer] for my fellow veterans.”

Love said that the decision to become a service officer was “a wonderful decision.” He said his goal is to improve the livelihood for those who served in the military. Love added that he enjoys receiving training from VFW.

“The training over the last four-to-five years has focused on the technical aspects of representing our clients,” Love said. “We learn about VA’s Special Monthly Compensation, grant writing, preparing a claim for the Board of Veteran Appeals and how to counsel an upset veteran, just to name a few.”

Boldoe said she believes VFW training is second to none and that she always learns something new to take back home to help veterans.

“This isn’t just a job for me — it’s an assignment,” Boldoe said. “I believe God put me here to help veterans.”

This article is featured in the February 2024 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), associated editor for VFW magazine.