

Getting Help: A Mini Guide for Justice-Involved and Homeless Veterans

The Veteran Roadmap · A free, plain-language guide for Veterans, families, and the people who support them.

How to use this guide

This guide is for Veterans who have had contact with the legal system, are experiencing homelessness, or are at risk of losing their housing. It is also for the family members, counselors, and case managers who help them. You don't have to read it front to back. Start with the section that fits your situation, and use the contact list at the end.

This is general information, not legal or financial advice. Programs and rules change, so confirm details with the VA, an accredited Veterans Service Officer (VSO), or an attorney.

If you need help right now

- **In crisis or thinking about suicide:** Call 988 and press 1, text 838255, or chat at VeteransCrisisLine.net. Free, confidential, 24/7. You don't need to be enrolled in VA care.
- **Homeless or about to lose housing:** Call 1-877-4AID-VET (1-877-424-3838). Free, confidential, 24/7.
- **Emergency:** Call 911.

The most important thing to know

A legal history does not automatically mean you're locked out of help. Many Veterans assume an arrest, a conviction, or time in jail or prison ends their options with the VA. In many cases it doesn't. What matters most is usually your **service and discharge status**, along with a few specific situations covered below. Ask before you assume the answer is no.

Part 1: Justice-Involved Veterans

Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO)

Every state has VJO Specialists. They are VA clinicians who work with local courts and jails to connect eligible Veterans to VA mental health, substance use, and other services, and who can liaise with the justice system on your behalf. They are not your lawyer, but they know how the VA and the courts interact.

- Find yours at va.gov/homeless/vjo.asp, or call your nearest VA medical center and ask for "Veterans Justice Outreach."
- Family members and defense attorneys can make the call too.

Veterans Treatment Court

Many areas have a Veterans Treatment Court. These are court-supervised programs that combine treatment, accountability, and mentoring from fellow Veterans, often as an alternative to jail. Eligibility depends on your county and your charge. Ask your attorney or public defender whether one is available, and ask your VJO Specialist what exists locally.

Health Care for Re-entry Veterans (HCRV)

If you are in prison or recently released, HCRV specialists meet with Veterans before release to plan for care, housing, and work, and can provide short-term help after release.

- State contacts: va.gov/homeless/reentry.asp
- Ask a case manager or chaplain to request an HCRV visit.

Release planning checklist

The first weeks after release are a high-risk time for homelessness and crisis. Try to line up as much of this as you can before release:

- ☐ A copy of your DD-214 (you can request one from the National Archives)
- ☐ Photo ID, Social Security card, and a working phone
- ☐ A place to stay for the first 30 days
- ☐ VA health care enrollment started, and a first appointment date
- ☐ A plan for medications
- ☐ Contact with an HCRV or VJO specialist
- ☐ The housing line saved in your phone: 1-877-424-3838

Benefits and incarceration: what to ask

- **VA health care:** Eligibility depends on your service and discharge status. VA services are limited while you are incarcerated, so the goal is to have things lined up for release.
 - **Disability compensation:** Being incarcerated for a long period for a felony can reduce what you are paid. Don't guess. Talk with an accredited VSO about your specific situation, and about how family members may be affected.
 - **Discharge status:** If you aren't sure your discharge qualifies, ask anyway. Some Veterans with less-than-honorable discharges can still get certain services or apply for an upgrade.
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Part 2: Veterans Facing Homelessness

Make the call, or walk in

The **National Call Center for Homeless Veterans (1-877-424-3838)** connects you with a homeless program specialist at your nearest VA medical center. You can also chat online at va.gov/homeless. Families and community providers can call too.

You can also walk into any VA medical center and ask for the **Homeless Program Coordinator**. You don't have to be on the street to qualify for help. Veterans at risk of homelessness can get help too.

The main programs

Program	What it does
HUD-VASH	A HUD housing voucher plus VA case management, for Veterans who are homeless and eligible for VA health care.
SSVF (Supportive Services for Veteran Families)	Short-term help for very low-income Veterans and families to keep housing or get re-housed quickly. Apply through a local SSVF provider.
GPD (Grant and Per Diem)	Transitional housing and service centers run by community organizations.
HCHV (Health Care for Homeless Veterans)	Outreach to shelters and streets, with links to health care and housing.

Program	What it does
Domiciliary / residential treatment	Live-in VA treatment programs for Veterans who need clinical support and housing.

Ask about all of them. The best fit depends on your income, family situation, health, and what's available locally.

What to have ready (but don't wait to call)

- DD-214 or other proof of service
- Photo ID and Social Security card, if you have them
- Any eviction notice or past-due notices
- Income information
- A phone number where you can be reached

No documents? Call anyway. Staff can help you get them.

If you're about to lose your housing

- **Act before the eviction date.** Prevention is faster and easier than re-housing.
- Ask about SSVF right away.
- Call **211** for local rent and utility help.
- Contact local legal aid. Many areas offer free eviction help.

Eligibility notes

- HUD-VASH requires eligibility for VA health care. Some situations, such as a lifetime sex offender registration requirement, can bar eligibility. Ask rather than assuming you're out.
 - Not sure your discharge qualifies? Ask the VA. Some programs have different rules.
 - If you also have a legal history, Veterans Justice Outreach and Re-entry specialists can help connect you (see Part 1).
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Part 3: Working With a Veterans Service Officer (VSO)

A VSO is an accredited representative who helps Veterans file and track VA claims, **at no cost**. You can find them through county and state Veterans service offices and through groups like DAV, VFW, and The American Legion.

What a VSO can help with

- Filing a disability compensation claim and gathering evidence for **service connection**, the VA's decision that a condition is related to your military service
- Appeals if a claim is denied
- Pension and other benefits
- Discharge upgrade information
- Questions about how legal history or incarceration may affect your benefits

Before your first meeting

- Bring your DD-214 and any service or medical records you have.
- Write down your conditions, when they started, and any treatment you've had.
- Ask about filing an **Intent to File**, which can help protect your start date for benefits while you gather paperwork.
- Tell your VSO about your housing or legal situation. It can affect how they prioritize and plan.

Good questions to ask

- Based on my record and discharge, what am I likely eligible for?
 - What evidence do I need for service connection?
 - Does my legal situation change anything about my benefits, and how do I protect them?
 - What are the next steps, and when should I check back?
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Part 4: Discharge Upgrades

Your **character of discharge** (Honorable, General, Other Than Honorable, and so on) affects which VA benefits you can use. A less-than-honorable discharge is not always the end of the road, for either justice-involved or homeless Veterans.

Why this matters for mental health

Untreated mental health conditions, including PTSD, depression, anxiety, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and military sexual trauma (MST), can lead to behaviors that get a service member in trouble: missed duty, conflicts, substance use, going absent. That conduct can then result in a less-than-honorable discharge. Military review boards are directed to give **liberal consideration** to the possibility that a mental health condition, TBI, or MST played a part in the misconduct behind the discharge.

Two separate paths

1. Asking the military to upgrade the discharge

- **Discharge Review Board (DRB):** For discharges within the past 15 years. Application is on DD Form 293.
- **Board for Correction of Military or Naval Records:** For discharges older than 15 years, or if the DRB denies you. Application is on DD Form 149.
- Your application can argue that a mental health condition, TBI, or MST contributed to the conduct. Evidence can include post-service diagnoses and treatment records, personal statements, and statements from people who knew you then. You **do not need records of in-service treatment** to make this argument.
- Free help is available from VSOs and from legal aid groups and law school clinics that handle Veterans' discharge cases.

2. Asking the VA for a character-of-discharge decision

The VA makes its own decision about whether your service counts for VA benefits. You can apply for VA health care or benefits **even if you have a less-than-honorable discharge**. The VA will review your record and decide. Some Veterans with an Other Than Honorable discharge can also get VA mental health care, and some programs, such as SSVF for housing help, have broader discharge rules than others. Don't rule yourself out. Ask.

How this connects to the rest of this guide

- **Justice-involved Veterans:** Talk to your VJO Specialist or a VSO about your discharge status early. It can affect what VA services you can use now.
- **Homeless Veterans:** HUD-VASH requires eligibility for VA health care. If your discharge is a barrier, ask the VA about a character-of-discharge review and about programs with different rules, and look into an upgrade in parallel. You don't have to wait for an

upgrade to ask for help today.

- An upgrade can take months, so start early and keep your housing and health care applications moving at the same time.
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Part 5: Disability Claims When You Never Got Mental Health Care in Service

Many Veterans never saw anyone for mental health while on active duty. Reasons are common: stigma, fear of career consequences, not knowing what was wrong, or no access. **That does not stop you from being rated for a service-connected mental health condition.**

What the VA looks for

To establish **service connection**, a claim generally needs three things:

1. **A current diagnosis** (from a VA or private clinician)
2. **Something that happened or began in service**, such as a stressor, an event, or symptoms
3. **A link** between the two, usually shown by a medical opinion or the VA's own exam

In-service treatment records help, but they are **not required**.

Evidence that can fill the gap

- **Records showing changes in behavior or performance:** disciplinary actions, drops in performance reports, substance use incidents, counseling statements, an unexplained change after a deployment or event
- **Buddy statements** (also called lay statements) from people who served with you or knew you then and noticed changes
- **Family statements** about how you were before and after service
- **Your own detailed statement** about what happened and when symptoms began
- **Post-service records** showing when you first sought care and what you reported about your history
- **For PTSD tied to MST**, the VA allows evidence beyond a formal report, such as changes in behavior, requests for transfer, or relationship problems. A VSO can explain what counts.

The VA will usually schedule a **Compensation and Pension (C&P) exam** where a clinician gives an opinion. Be honest and specific about your history, your symptoms, and how they affect daily life and work.

How ratings work

Mental health conditions are rated from 0% to 100%, in steps of 10%, based mainly on how much the condition affects your work and social life. A rating can bring monthly compensation and access to more VA health care.

If you're also homeless

Tell your VSO and the VA that you are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The VA can give **priority processing** to claims from Veterans who are homeless or in severe financial hardship, so ask your VSO to flag it. You will also need a reliable way to get mail. A VSO office, shelter, or case manager's address may work, so ask them.

Tips

- File an **Intent to File** first to protect your start date while you gather evidence.
 - Work with an accredited VSO. It's free, and they know what evidence the VA looks for.
 - If you're denied, you can appeal. A denial is not always the last word.
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Helping someone else

- Make the call together, or make it for them.
- Offer to go with them to the VA medical center or VSO office.
- Keep the first step small. One call is enough to begin.
- Stay in touch. Follow-up often matters more than any single appointment.
- If they talk about hurting themselves, don't wait. Call or text the Veterans Crisis Line (988, press 1).

Quick reference

Need	Contact
Crisis	988, press 1 · text 838255 · VeteransCrisisLine.net

Need	Contact
Housing crisis (24/7)	1-877-424-3838
Justice-involved outreach	va.gov/homeless/vjo.asp
Re-entry from prison	va.gov/homeless/reentry.asp
Find your VA medical center	va.gov/directory
Local help with rent, utilities, food	211
Free claims help	Your county or state Veterans service office, DAV, VFW, The American Legion

About The Veteran Roadmap

The Veteran Roadmap creates plain-language guides to help Veterans find and use the benefits and support they've earned. Created by Andy Kurien, U.S. Navy veteran (2000–2004) and former VA Community Care specialist.

Free guides, tools, and resources: veteran-roadmap.com

Last reviewed October 2026. This guide is for general information only and is not legal, medical, or financial advice.