

# POST SERVICE OFFICER



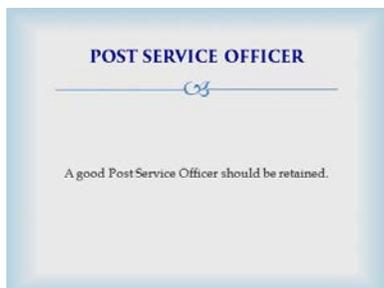
## ROLE OF THE POST SERVICE OFFICER

The role of the **volunteer** Post Service Officer may vary somewhat from Department to Department. Therefore, it is extremely important that the Post Service Officer discuss with the Department Service Officer the Department's policy regarding their assistance to veterans and their dependents.



In general, the PSO primary responsibility is to help the DSO protect a claimant's interests. **This means doing nothing that could have an adverse effect on his/her claim, including providing information or advice that may not be accurate or proper.**

The Post Service Officer should work with and through The American Legion Department Service Officer and the staff of Legion accredited representatives located at the VA regional office in the filing of any claim or evidence in support of a claim or appeal. Similarly, the PSO should strongly advise claimants that it is to their advantage to cooperate with and work through the DSO. Only the DSOs and their staff have direct access to a claimant's VA claims folder ("C-file") and can take official action on the claimant's behalf.



A good service officer should be retained. The value of a post service officer increases with length of service. As the service officer's reputation grows, so will the prestige of the organization in your community. The job calls for a competent and dedicated person, preferably one who lives and works nearby and is readily available to those needing assistance. He or she is responsible for bringing to the attention of all veterans and their dependents the

rights and benefits granted them by law – law The American Legion helped craft.

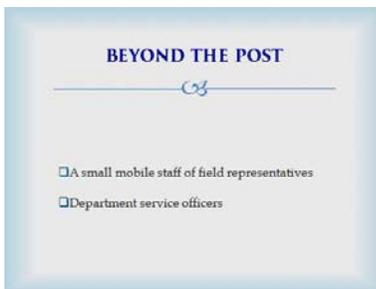
The service officer must know how to access and utilize the expert services available through Legion channels and other community agencies. The job requires timely submission of information to full-time professionals so that every veteran and his or her dependents are adequately represented. The service officer's report should be a standard part of every meeting.

Veterans needing assistance with benefits and programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and other military related matters, often turn to The American Legion for help. For most veterans, the post in their community is "The American Legion," This means veterans needing help are going to look for it at the local post. This is especially true today with the thousands of troops deploying and returning from the War on Terrorism. If a veteran goes to a post for help and is turned away or treated with indifference, The American Legion,

not the post, is seen as not caring about veterans. Regardless of what the Legion has done or is currently doing for veterans at the state and national levels The American Legion has turned away a veteran and potential new member. This is why it is so important that every post have a Post Service Officer (PSO) truly interested in helping fellow veterans.

The PSO is often the initial contact between The American Legion and the veteran. The PSO, in most instances, is not a professional service officer, nor is he or she an “accredited” representative of The American Legion (the exception would be when a professional service officer, county, state or Legion, also serves as the PSO for his or her post). It isn’t necessary for the PSO to be an expert in veterans’ law or benefits. What is important is for the PSO to have a strong desire to assist veterans. The purpose of the PSO is to be an initial point of contact regarding veteran issues by providing veterans in the community where the post is located with basic information and assistance, including referral as directed by the Department Service Officer (DSO). Given the complexity and broad range of rules that govern VA benefits, it is critically important for the PSO to work with the professional American Legion DSO and ensure any paperwork submitted by the veteran is forwarded to the DSO in a timely manner.

The PSO should be familiar with laws and regulations pertaining to the filing of claims, as well as the policies and guidelines established by the National VA&R Commission as outlined in the VA&R “Code of Procedure.” (See Disability Claims section.) However, it cannot be stressed enough, that given both the volume of regulations and the technical nature of the benefits process, the PSO should coordinate his/her efforts to assist a veteran or dependent with an accredited American Legion service officer, according to the customs of his or her department.



Beyond the post, The American Legion maintains a full staff of appeals representatives in Washington.

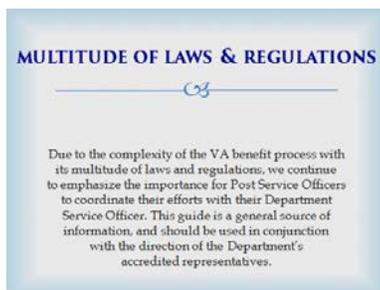
A small mobile staff of field representatives provides a constant flow of information concerning conditions in VA hospitals, domiciles and regional offices. Other Legion representatives assist veterans who petition Department of Defense boards for review of less than fully honorable discharges or dismissal from the military. They also help veterans obtain deserved decorations and medals.

Department service officers can provide necessary claims forms. Additional information comes through department publications, National Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation

bulletins, memorandums and VA pamphlets. Many departments conduct training schools for post service officers to add to their knowledge and contacts, and all have trained service officers in VA regional offices and hospitals.

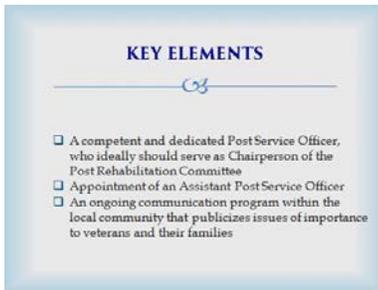
With most of today's veterans population composed of those who served during the Vietnam, Persian Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the work of the post service officer continues to be vital. Even more than older veterans, these men and women are likely to not be fully versed in veterans benefits and programs. Meanwhile, older veterans need advice on how to integrate possible benefits into their retirement plans. Dependents should be visited as soon as feasible after a veteran's death.

**Service Committee:** This committee is key to every successful post, assisting returning veterans in their transition to civilian life. Other concerns include employment, on-the-job training, and educating veterans on their rights and benefits. The committee should also maintain contact with any members of the armed forces from the post's community. The post service officer may chair the committee; however, the responsibilities of the committee go beyond the day-to-day functions of a good service officer in filing claims



*Due to the complexity of the VA benefit process with its multitude of laws and regulations, we continue to emphasize the importance for Post Service Officers to coordinate their efforts with their Department Service Officer. This guide is a general source of information, and should be used in conjunction with the direction of the Department's accredited representatives.*

## THE KEY ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL SERVICE PROGRAM ARE:



- A competent and dedicated Post Service Officer, who ideally should serve as Chairperson of the Post Rehabilitation Committee
- Appointment of an Assistant Post Service Officer
- An ongoing communication program within the local community that publicizes issues of importance to veterans and their families

### DEPARTMENT SERVICE OFFICER

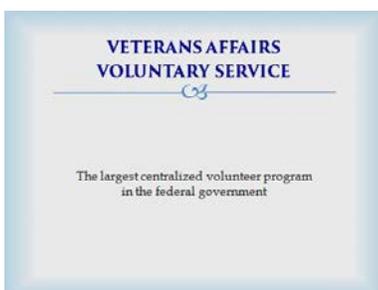


“Department Service Officer or DSO” includes all American Legion professional service officer employees of a Department or a State Veterans agency. The DSO is normally located at the VA regional office (RO). In some states there is more than one RO and there will be one or more DSOs.

DSOs have specialized training and experience that contribute to a thorough knowledge of VA regulations and instructions. They are familiar with the broad spectrum of VA programs and operations. The DSO is also an accredited representative, responsible for providing assistance and representation in any claim for VA benefits.

### THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS VOLUNTARY SERVICE PROGRAM

#### BACKGROUND



The American Legion has been a staunch supporter and active participant in the Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS) program since its inception in 1946. Today, as the largest centralized volunteer program in the federal government, VAVS is tremendously successful. It has developed an exciting and challenging concept of volunteer service within the VA health care system. Volunteer contributions in donated hours of service,

gifts and donations, direct patient care programs and support activities and services that may not be fiscal priorities from year to year.

The success of the VAVS program is due to the enthusiastic efforts on the part of many organizations such as The American Legion, and especially through the efforts of individuals displaying determination and dedication to help veterans using VA services.

## **ABOUT VOLUNTARY SERVICE**

Today, across the country we have close to 7,000 volunteers that serve over 900,000 hours annually at various VA Medical Centers, Community Based Outpatient Centers, Vet Centers, Nursing Homes, State Veterans Homes, and many more locations in support of our hospitalized veterans. In every VA Medical Center, there are American Legion VAVS Representatives and Deputy Representatives that attend quarterly hospital meetings and coordinate volunteers and donation needs lists with their local community American Legion posts. Anyone can volunteer, for information concerning individual or post participation, you can contact the Chief of Voluntary Service at the local VA Medical Center. They arrange initial screenings and help veterans choose the program that best meets their needs. The volunteer decides where they want to volunteer and how they want to volunteer (be regularly scheduled or serve on an occasional basis).

In the constantly evolving environment of VA health care delivery, there is an abundance of opportunities for everyone to contribute as a volunteer. In the VA hospital and Polytrauma Centers, a volunteer can provide administration support, escort patients, be a food court ambassador, coffee server, information desk worker, shuttle driver and help with the veterans' history project. In the community, you can volunteer at the Fisher House, Community Based Outpatient Clinic and at a Vet Center.

The VA has moved toward accommodating the skills of anyone who wants to volunteer, and within the time frame you have available. This can involve direct patient contact, or none at all depending on the comfort level of the volunteer. Activities can be long-term, short-term or on an occasional basis. American Legion Posts can also participate by offering their facilities and their members to the VAVS program, sponsoring youth volunteers, or partnering with local businesses and agencies to provide services to veterans.

## **THE AMERICAN LEGION HOMELESS VETERANS TASK FORCE**



The American Legion coordinates a Homeless Veterans Task Force (HVTF) amongst its 55 departments. Our goal is to augment existing homeless veteran providers, the VA Network Homeless Coordinators, and the Department of Labor's Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP), Veterans Workforce Investment Program (VWIP), Disabled Veterans' Outreach Personnel (DVOPs) and Local Veterans' Employment

Representative (LVERs). In addition to augmentation, we then attempt to fill in the gaps

where there is no coverage. Each of The American Legion's Departments contains an HVTF chairman and an employment chairman. These two individuals coordinate activities with The American Legion's local posts within their state. The three-tiered coordination of these two chairmen and numerous local posts attempt to symbiotically assist homeless veterans and prevent future homelessness.

The American Legion has conducted training with the assistance of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV), DOL-VETS, Project Homeless Connect, and VA on how to apply for Federal grants in various assistance programs, most notably the "Stand Down" and Grant and Per Diem programs.

It is our goal to assist the Grant and Per Diem program by enabling individual posts and homeless providers to use The American Legion as a force multiplier. We may not have the job-specific expertise in the fields of social work and mental health, but we do have 2.7 million volunteers with an impressive network of resources within their communities.

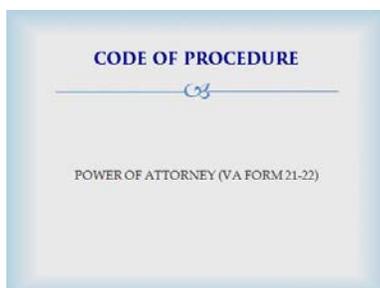
The American Legion augments homeless veteran providers with transportation, food, clothing, cash and in kind donations, technical assistance, employment placement, employment referral, claims assistance, veterans' benefits assistance, and in some cases housing for homeless veterans. The American Legion department service officers are accredited representatives that assist homeless veterans with their VA compensation and pension claims, and are fierce advocates for assuring that all VA benefits are afforded to the unfortunate homeless veterans that they may encounter.

## **CODE OF PROCEDURE**

The VA&R Commission has established certain formal policies and procedures that Post Service Officers and Department Service Officers should follow in any claim for VA benefits. This "Code of Procedure" (Revised August 2005) safeguards the interests of the National Organization, the Departments and Posts in carrying out The American Legion's program of service to veterans and their families.

The following are essential elements of the Code:

### **POWER OF ATTORNEY (VA FORM 21-22):**

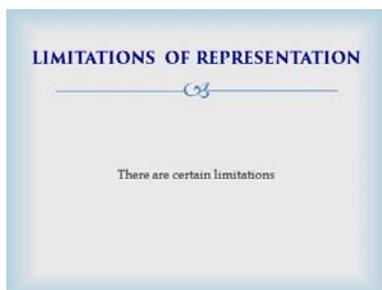


This form, "Appointment of Veterans Service Organization as Claimant's Representative" or "POA," notifies the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) what organization is officially authorized to represent a particular claimant. VA recognizes one organization at a time as a claimant's representative.

With certain exceptions, a POA may be accepted from:

- a. the veteran or, if incompetent, the veteran's legal guardian, wife, parent, near relative, or manager of an institution in which the veteran is maintained;
- b. a deceased veteran's dependents or designated beneficiaries, or, if incompetent, the fiduciary;
- c. persons entitled to reimbursement for expenses incurred in connection with the veteran's last illness and burial.

## **LIMITATIONS OF REPRESENTATION**



There are certain limitations that may affect The American Legion's efforts to assist a claimant:

- a. **Character of Discharge:** Almost always, an "Honorable" or "General under Honorable Conditions" is required to be eligible for most VA benefits. The DSO should be consulted about less than honorable discharges.
- b. **Representation and Power of Attorney:** American Legion "representation" can only be provided by a professional service officer who has been "accredited" by the VA General Counsel. To obtain Legion representation and all related services requires the filing of VA Form 21-22, "Appointment of Veterans Service Organization as Claimant's Representative." Once the form is a part of the VA record, VA will provide the DSO with a copy of all correspondence sent to the claimant. Once filed, the POA remains valid unless withdrawn by the claimant or the representative.

**Note:** It is contrary to the policy of The American Legion to accept POA from any person whose interests are detrimental or adverse to those of the veteran regardless of the fact The American Legion does not hold the veteran's POA.

It is also contrary to the policy of The American Legion to participate in a "contested claim," that is, one in which there are two persons seeking or claiming the same benefit, such as two former spouses.



