

# DISABILITY COMPENSATION VETERAN EXPERIENCE JOURNEY MAP



## ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Veterans Experience Office (VEO) partnered with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to conduct human-centered design (HCD) activities to better understand the experiences of Veterans going through the disability compensation claims process.

The HCD activities intend to:

- Co-design improvements to the disability compensation claims process that are human-centered while still meeting business requirements.
- Establish measurement at the moments that matter, which will inform short- and long-term process improvements.
- Empower employees with the tools and capabilities to ensure they are successful in creating a positive customer experience for Veterans, their families, and caregivers.
- Define tangible outcomes for Veterans in need of further support.
- The design team applied HCD methodology to capture the Veteran experience with the disability compensation claims process from the Veteran’s point of view. Using one-on-one interviews, the team captured stories, sentiments, and individual experiences of Veterans who recently filed a disability claim. Through analysis, synthesis, and discussion, the team then developed this journey map, a Disability Compensation Claim Service Blueprint, and a report of insights and findings, all of which represent the Veterans’ and employees’ experiences.

## WHAT IS HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN?

Human-Centered Design (HCD) is a problem-solving approach that helps make systems and products more responsive to the people who use them. It requires rigorous qualitative research directed toward the goal of deeply understanding the needs, insights, emotions and lived experiences of people. HCD prioritizes customers’ needs over system needs in solution development. VA uses HCD to learn from people in the Veteran ecosystem such as Veterans, their families, caregivers, survivors, VA employees, supporters and stakeholders.

HCD involves several key phases of sequential work: discovery, design, delivery and measurement. HCD is also cyclical. Once a design solution is launched, we measure its effectiveness against initial and intended aims, and then iterate based on feedback - thus improving the solution over time. HCD recognizes that people and their needs are dynamic and changing and so our solutions must also be dynamic and changing.

## WHAT IS A JOURNEY MAP?

A Journey Map organizes customer feedback and helps provide a holistic understanding of the customer experience. Journey maps can feature customers’ interaction points, motivations, attitudes, emotions, and more. Thus, a journey map represents the overall experience collated from a representative sample of customers, rather than a single customer’s experience.

A journey map can be used to illustrate the Veteran perspective of an experience. The map highlights bright spots, pain points and moments that matter, which can inform improvements and measurement.

## KEY PROJECT INSIGHTS

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <b>Insight 1: Transparency and Expectations</b> <p>A perceived lack of transparency and poor communication results in a mismatch of Veteran expectations of the process and their actual experiences. This leaves Veterans feeling frustrated and lost during the process and ultimately disappointed when receiving their rating decision. Veterans often feel that the lack of transparency is intentional on the part of VA.</p> | <b>Insight 2: Fellow Veterans as Influential Advocates and Critics</b> <p>Veterans see fellow Veterans as their best source of information. A single Veteran experience impacts more than one Veteran; negative experiences may discourage others from filing, while good experiences may inspire more Veterans to submit claims.</p> | <b>Insight 3: Gambling for Help</b> <p>While some Veterans fully trust and respect Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) for their knowledge of the process, reaching out to a VSO can feel like a gamble of a Veteran’s time and energy because beneficial support is not guaranteed. While many Veterans noted invaluable support from VSOs, other Veterans struggle to find truly helpful support from organizations and individuals.</p> |
| <b>Insight 4: Apprehension and Motivation to File</b> <p>Filing a claim can be an emotionally taxing decision, requiring Veterans to deeply consider how their past service impacts in their long-term future. Veterans cautiously consider filing a claim, forcing them to weigh their motivation to file against their apprehension regarding the claims process.</p>   | <b>Insight 5: Needle in a Haystack</b> <p>Veterans are often uncertain what evidence is needed to substantiate their claim. As a result, Veterans tend to submit excessive documentation and get frustrated when the documentation they submitted still is not enough.</p>  | <b>Insight 6: Stressful Exam Process</b> <p>Veterans’ exam experiences dramatically shape their overall perspective of the claims process. Negative experiences, such as frustrating issues with scheduling their appointment or examiners who are not thorough enough during the exam, can leave Veterans feeling disheartened about the outcome of their claim.</p>  |
| <b>Insight 7: Accessible but Incomplete Information</b> <p>Veterans often find themselves navigating multiple means of communication from VA. Inconsistent and inconclusive messaging creates confusion for the Veteran in understanding where they are in the claims process.</p>  | <b>Insight 8: Doubting Decision Letters</b> <p>Receiving a decision letter can be a pleasant surprise or a source of frustration and confusion for Veterans, regardless of the actual decision. Decision letters often do not provide clarity for Veterans on any future steps or how their decision might change in the future.</p>  | <b>Insight 9: Trust and Personal Connection</b> <p>Veterans prefer one-on-one conversations with VA representatives over scripted responses. Veterans often hold on to prior notifications sent by VA because they don’t always trust that the future communication with VA representatives will remain consistent with information they have already received.</p>  |

## VETERAN DEMOGRAPHICS INFORMING THIS STUDY

|  |   |   |  |   |  |
|--|---|---|--|---|--|
| <b>GENDER</b><br><br>MEN ----- 30<br>WOMEN ----- 30<br><br><b>TOTAL</b> 60   | <b>AGE</b><br><br>26-40 ----- 16<br>41-65 ----- 29<br>65+ ----- 15<br><br><b>TOTAL</b> 60   | <b>RACE</b><br><br>ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER ----- 7<br>BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN ----- 7<br>NATIVE AMERICAN OR ALASKA NATIVE ----- 3<br>WHITE/CAUCASIAN ----- 40<br>OTHER ----- 3<br><br><b>TOTAL</b> 60 | <b>INCOME LEVEL*</b><br><br>LOW ----- 3<br>LOW-MODERATE ----- 9<br>MODERATE ----- 27<br>MODERATE-HIGH ----- 15<br>HIGH ----- 5<br><br><b>TOTAL</b> 59  | <b>SEXUAL ORIENTATION</b><br><br>ASEXUAL ----- 1<br>BISEXUAL ----- 2<br>HETEROSEXUAL/STRAIGHT ----- 55<br>PANSEXUAL ----- 1<br>OTHER ----- 1<br><br><b>TOTAL</b> 60 | <b>GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION</b><br><br>RURAL ----- 22<br>URBAN ----- 14<br>SUBURBAN ----- 24<br><br><b>TOTAL</b> 60 |
| <b>FILING DATE</b><br><br>FILED WHILE ON ACTIVE DUTY ----- 16<br>FILED AFTER SEPARATING <6 MONTHS ----- 18<br>FILED AFTER SEPARATING >1 YEAR ----- 7<br>FILED AFTER SEPARATING 1+ YEAR ----- 19<br><br><b>TOTAL</b> 60 | <b>STATUS OF CLAIM</b><br><br>GATHERING EVIDENCE ----- 28<br>PREPARATION FOR DECISION ----- 6<br>PENDING DECISION APPROVAL ----- 2<br>PREPARATION FOR NOTIFICATION ----- 1<br>COMPLETED ----- 23<br><br><b>TOTAL</b> 60 | <b>TYPE OF CLAIM</b><br><br>NEW / INCREASE ----- 23<br>INITIAL COMPENSATION ----- 20<br>BDD-INITIAL ----- 16<br>IDES NON-ORIGINAL ----- 1<br><br><b>TOTAL</b> 60                                    | <b>SERVICE BRANCH</b><br><br>AIR FORCE ----- 19<br>ARMY ----- 26<br>COAST GUARD ----- 2<br>MARINE CORPS ----- 4<br>NAVY ----- 9<br><br><b>TOTAL</b> 60 | <b>SERVICE ERA</b><br><br>VIETNAM ERA ----- 7<br>PERSIAN GULF WAR ----- 47<br>PEACETIME ERA ----- 6<br><br><b>TOTAL</b> 60  |  |

\* Data not shared by all Veteran participants



# DISABILITY COMPENSATION VETERAN EXPERIENCE

## Overall Journey Steps and Phases

This journey map depicts the experience of a Veteran navigating the disability compensation claims process. Acknowledging the disability compensation claims process widely varies for each Veteran, this journey highlights key phases and steps that many Veterans experience.

Phases, steps, and descriptions provide the perspective of the Veteran throughout the non-linear experience. Subsequent pages outline more detail, context, and emotion within each step of the Veteran journey.

HOW TO READ THE JOURNEY MAP

DECIDE TO FILE

Veterans may be seeking specific healthcare benefits, may want to be taken care of for serving their country, or have been told compensation is something they should receive.

Learn About Claims

Step of the Journey

Description

Phase within the Journey

| ACRONYM KEY                             |                                    |
|---|------------------------------------|
| BDD                                     | NBDD                               |
| Benefits Delivery at Discharge          | Non-Benefits Delivery at Discharge |
| IDES                                    | TAP                                |
| Integrated Disability Evaluation System | Transition Assistance Program      |
| IED                                     | TBI                                |
| Improvised Explosive Device             | Traumatic Brain Injury             |
| PCP                                     | VA                                 |
| Primary Care Physician                  | Veterans Affairs                   |
|   | VSO                                |
|   | Veterans Service Organization      |

**GET SUPPORT**

Some Veterans seek out support from VSOs, friends, family, or other Veterans once they decide to file a compensation claim.

**HEAR ABOUT DISABILITY COMPENSATION CLAIMS**

Veterans hear about the disability compensation process through many channels, while serving and after military separation.

Learn About Claims

**DECIDE TO FILE**

Veterans may be seeking specific healthcare benefits, may want to be taken care of for serving their country, or have been told compensation is something they should receive.

Learn About Claims

**BUILD A CASE**

Veterans begin to evaluate which of their conditions they are claiming, sometimes with external support.

Initiate a Claim

**GATHER RECORDS**

Many Veterans must locate medical and military records to provide evidence in support of their claim.

Initiate a Claim

**SUBMIT**

Veterans have the option to submit their claim through paper forms or online portal, directly entered by the Veteran or through a third party.

Initiate a Claim

**WAIT**

Once a compensation claim is submitted, Veterans wait.

Point of Inaction

**SET UP AN EXAM**

Many Veterans are contacted with information to schedule and attend an exam appointment, through VA or external contractors.

Receive Examinations

**SEE A DOCTOR**

Veterans are examined by clinicians to document conditions in their claim.

Receive Examinations

**WAIT**

Once exams are complete, Veterans wait.

Point of Inaction

**NEVER FILE A CLAIM**

Some Veterans choose not to enter the process to file a disability compensation claim.

Point of Inaction

**FIGHT FOR MORE**

Veterans may decide to file an appeal, an additional claim, or an increase.

Post-Claim

**GET COMPENSATED**

Veterans access benefits and compensation payment as a result of VA's decision and may end the claims process or return for more.

Post-Claim

**INTERPRET DECISION**

Veterans interpret the decision made on their claim.

Receive Decision

**REQUESTED FOR MORE PROOF (DEFERRAL)**

Some Veterans learn that a decision cannot be made on their entire claim or part of their claim, meaning they are asked for further documentation or examinations.

Point of Inaction

**GET A NOTIFICATION**

Veterans receive notification of their claims benefits through multiple channels.

Receive Decision

**FEEL DISAPPOINTED**

Veterans may receive and accept a less-than-desired outcome.

Post-Claim

Created January 2023 - FINAL DRAFT



# DISABILITY COMPENSATION VETERAN EXPERIENCE

## Emotional Journey, Bright Spots and Pain Points

This journey map displays the non-linear nature of the experience in the disability compensation claims process and outlines bright spots (good experiences) and pain points (negative experiences) for each step in the Journey. Quotes also provide direct Veteran feedback and add context to particular experiences.

### HOW TO READ THE JOURNEY MAP

**DECIDE TO FILE**

Bright Spots:

- Being pushed in the right direction by TAP or outbriefing
- Changes in legislation drive new claims
- Addressing health conditions and proactive about health coverage

Pain Points:

- Reeling from the aftermath of active duty, and trying to find support within the VA
- Concerns that they "need" their benefits, don't have the "right" to file the claim

**Learn About Claims**

**Step of the Journey**

**Bright Spots and Pain Points**

These descriptions capture the nuance and breadth of experiences Veterans feel at this stage in the journey

**Phase within the Journey**

**Learn About Claims**

☆

**Moments that Matter**

These are key moments in the Veteran journey that have the ability to dramatically shape the experience a Veteran has, positively or negatively.

Further description of Moments that Matter can be found on the next page.

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**Highly Emotional Points**

Certain points in the journey are more emotionally charged for Veterans. These heat-map-like indicators show where Veterans are experiencing the most negative emotions in the journey, which are also reflected in the description of the pain points.

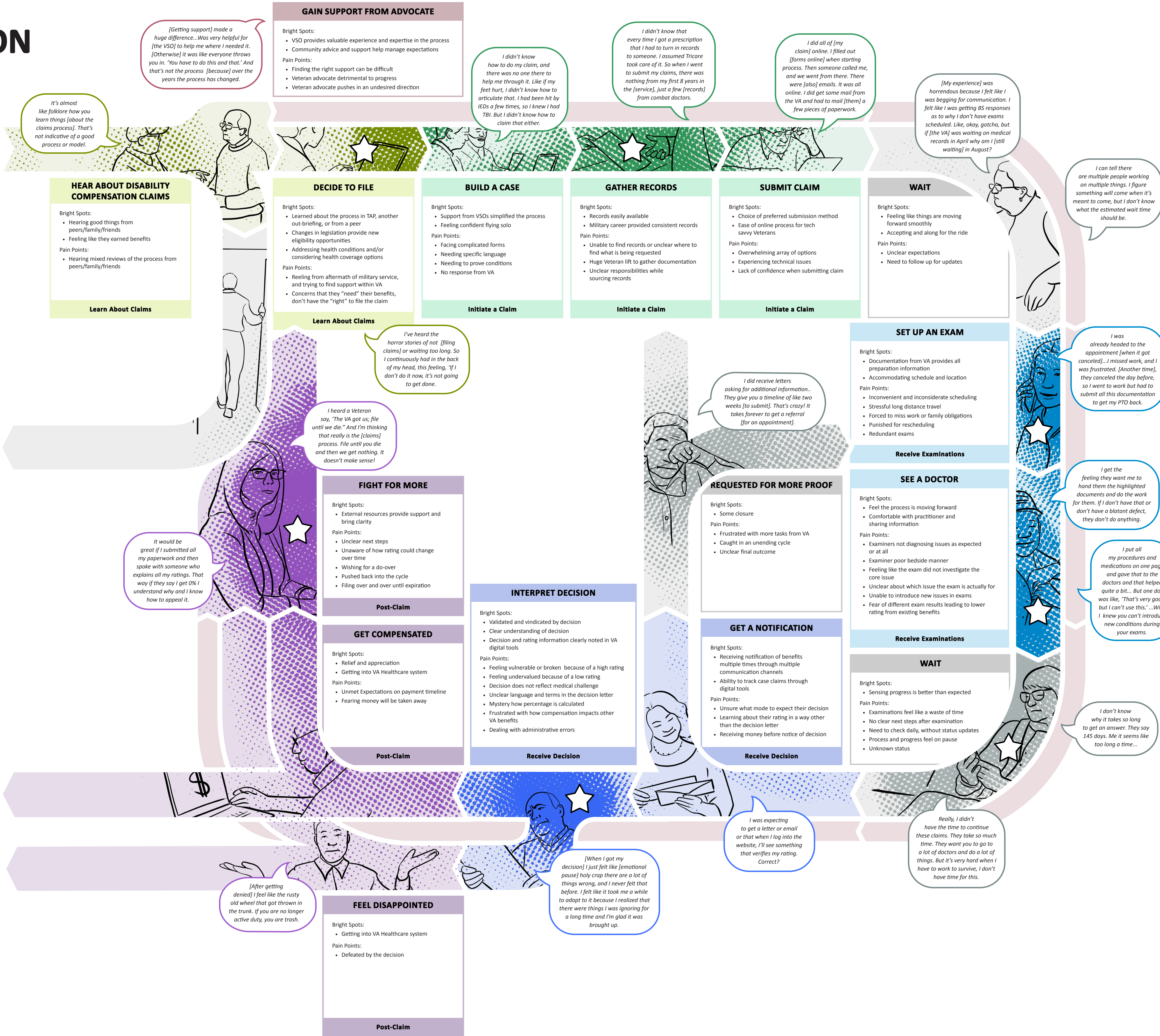
Quote

**Veteran Quotes**

Key Veteran quotes provide further description of the experiences they are having and offer important emotional insight into how they are thinking and feeling at each stage.

### ACRONYM KEY

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>BDD</b><br>Benefits Delivery at Discharge           | <b>NBDD</b><br>Non-Benefits Delivery at Discharge |
| <b>IDES</b><br>Integrated Disability Evaluation System | <b>TAP</b><br>Transition Assistance Program       |
| <b>IED</b><br>Improvised Explosive Device              | <b>TBI</b><br>Traumatic Brain Injury              |
| <b>PCP</b><br>Primary Care Physician                   | <b>VA</b><br>Veterans Affairs                     |
|  | <b>VSO</b><br>Veterans Service Organization       |





# DISABILITY COMPENSATION VETERAN EXPERIENCE

## Moments That Matter

This journey map displays the non-linear nature of the experience in the disability compensation claims process and outlines seven key moments that can make or break the experience for Veterans. The moments that matter within the Veteran journey are key intervention points with the potential for highest impact or influence on the overall experience.

### HOW TO READ THE JOURNEY MAP

**DECIDE TO FILE**

**Moment That Matters**

A Veteran's decision to file a disability compensation claim hinges on their motivation to file and the help they receive learning about the process. The expectations set during their decision to file impacts their overall experience.

**Step of the Journey**

**Moments that Matter**

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