

SSA and VA Disability Benefits: Tips for Veterans

Connecting Veterans with Social Security Administration (SSA) disability benefits is a critical step to increasing income stability for Veterans and their families, as well as providing health insurance for those who may not qualify for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care. Veterans may be eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), in conjunction with, or as an alternative to VA disability payments. They may also use the Medicaid and Medicare health benefits that come with SSI/SSDI to supplement VA health services.

The definition of disability and application process is different for SSA and VA disability benefits, and Veterans may begin receiving SSA benefits while they are waiting on a VA benefit decision.

Definition of Disability

VA Benefits

For service-connected disability benefits through the VA, the applicant must show that they have a disabling condition that was “incurred or aggravated by their military service.”¹ The compensation rates are paid on a graduated scale, based on the degree of a Veteran’s disability, ranging from 10 to 100 percent, in 10 percent increments. Pensions, or non-service connected disability payments, require that Veterans served in a wartime period, have limited resources and assets, and have a discharge other than dishonorable (among other factors).

SSA Benefits

Alternatively, the definition of disability for SSI/SSDI does not require the Veteran’s disability to be linked to their military service, does not take into account a Veteran’s discharge status, and does not pay on a graduated scale. For SSI/SSDI, the Veteran needs to show:

1. Evidence of a physical or mental health condition, which results in functional impairments that limit their ability to work at a substantial gainful level (quantified as \$1,350/month in 2022).
2. That the disabling condition has lasted, or is expected to last, for 12 months or end in death.

SSA Expedited Processing for Veterans

Veterans may qualify for programs from SSA that expedite disability decisions:

1. 100% Permanent and Total Veterans Initiative

In March 2014, SSA introduced a new initiative to expedite the processing of applications from Veterans who have a 100% Permanent and Total (P&T) disability rating from the VA. To receive expedited processing, Veterans should identify themselves as a “Veteran rated 100% P&T” when initiating the SSI/SSDI application, and should provide the VA rating notification letter to SSA.

2. Wounded Warriors

Veterans who received disabling mental or physical health injuries while on active duty on or after October 1, 2001 are eligible for expedited SSI/SSDI application processing. The injury does not need to have occurred during combat operations. When initiating the SSI/SSDI application, Veterans should inform SSA that their injury occurred while on active duty.

More information about SSA expedited processing can be found at: <https://www.ssa.gov/people/veterans/>.

¹ “Federal Benefits for Veterans, Dependents and Survivors,” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016 Edition.

How VA Disability Benefits Impact Social Security Payments

Veterans who receive VA disability benefits may also receive SSA benefits, depending on the amount received from the VA and if they are approved for SSI or SSDI.

SSI

Since SSI is a needs-based program, additional income from VA benefits will affect the cash benefit amount. SSA classifies VA benefits as “unearned income,” since it does not come from paid employment. As such, it will be deducted dollar for dollar from the SSI federal payment amount, after a general exclusion of \$20. All SSI recipients are eligible for this exclusion, where the first \$20 of earned or unearned income is not counted against their SSI payment.

For example, Paul receives partial VA benefits of \$400 per month, and has been approved for SSI. The following table illustrates how the VA benefits will affect his SSI cash benefit:

| | |
|--|---------|
| VA Monthly Disability Benefit Amount | \$400 |
| <i>General Exclusion</i> | - \$20 |
| Counted Income | = \$380 |
| Maximum Monthly SSI Benefit Amount (2022 rates) | \$841 |
| <i>Counted Income</i> | - \$380 |
| Monthly SSI Amount | = \$461 |
| Total Monthly Income (VA + SSI benefit amounts) | \$861 |

Veterans who are approved for a VA pension will not qualify to receive SSI because the pension amount is higher than the SSI payment amount, which reduces the SSI payment amount to zero in the equation above. However, these Veterans may qualify to receive SSDI if they’ve earned enough work credits through SSA.

SSDI

Alternatively, SSDI benefits are not affected by unearned income through VA benefits. In this example, Jane receives partial VA benefits of \$400 per month. Because she worked and paid into the Social Security system, she now receives \$850 per month in SSDI. Her VA and SSDI monthly benefit amounts will be added together:

| | |
|--|----------|
| VA Monthly Disability Benefit Amount | \$400 |
| SSDI Monthly Benefit Amount | + \$850 |
| Total Monthly Income (VA + SSDI payments) | = \$1250 |

Resources:

Using the SOAR Model to Assist Veterans

The SOAR (SSI/SSDI, Outreach, Access, and Recovery) model assists Veterans nationwide who are experiencing or at-risk of homelessness in accessing SSA disability benefits. Training in the SOAR model is available online, free of charge, from the SAMHSA SOAR Technical Assistance Center. For more information on SOAR, contact SOAR@prainc.com or visit <https://soarworks.samhsa.gov>.

National Call Center for Homeless Veterans

If you, or a Veteran you know, is experiencing or at-risk of homelessness, make the call to 877-4AID-VET (424-3838) to access 24/7 confidential support and connect with VA services.