



Equity Assessment and Action Steps for Mental Health Compensation Benefits

As a part of the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) comprehensive efforts to ensure that all Veterans receive the benefits they have earned, VA has identified that – while Black Veterans receive VA benefits at higher rates than other Veterans – their grant rates for disability compensation are lower for mental health conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder.

More specifically, a higher percentage of Black Veterans currently receive disability compensation benefits than white Veterans for mental health conditions (21.7% vs. 12.7%). On average, Black Veterans also apply for disability compensation at higher rates and receive slightly higher [disability ratings](#) from VA than white Veterans. However, Black Veterans have lower grant rates than white Veterans for mental health conditions (70.3% vs. 76.0%). While this gap in Veteran grant rates has decreased by approximately 40% since 2017, there is still more work to do to understand and address it.

To better understand the root cause of this issue, VA's Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) conducted an equity assessment of mental health-related compensation benefits to identify any barriers that may lead to disparities in grant rates. The study reviewed all mental health claims from Veterans who first separated from active duty in 2017 or 2018 and had decisions by March 2023. This study of recently separated Veterans found that Black Veterans have grant rates better than or equal to other Veterans when they apply for disability compensation benefits within the first year of leaving the military and using a VA-accredited Veterans Service Organization (VSO).

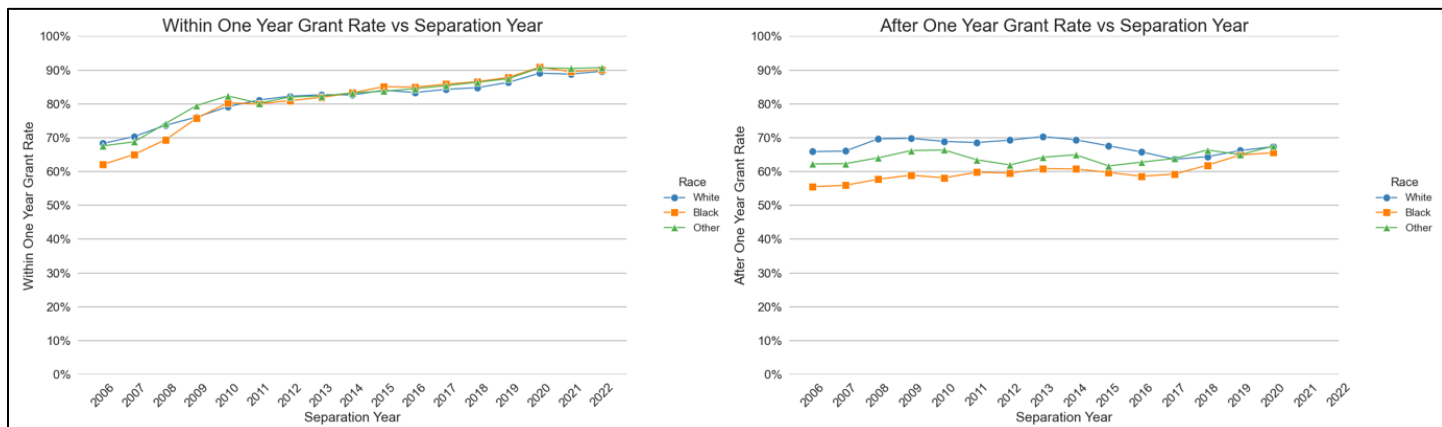
In response to this new data, VA will be visiting 15 or more Department of Defense installations to work with transitioning service members, updating our [Transition Assistance Program](#) curriculum that is provided to all transitioning service members, updating VA [Solid Start](#) scripts to inform recently transitioned service members of their earned benefits, working directly with VSOs to engage with Black Veterans, and doing direct outreach to encourage Black Veterans to file for disability compensation benefits within the first year of discharge and utilize accredited VSOs when filing a claim. VA will also continue to study this issue moving forward to better understand it and take steps to address it.

What We Found

In 2023, VA studied all mental health claims from Veterans who first separated from active duty in 2017 or 2018 and had decisions by March 2023. This included an analysis of 349,714 Veterans, 150,947 of whom filed claims and received decisions in time for the study.

“Within One Year” Effect

This review found that, for Veterans who separated in 2017 or 2018, Black Veterans had higher grant rates than white Veterans on Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) (95.8% to 93.9%), [Integrated Disability Evaluation System or IDES](#) (93.1% to 88.4%), and all other claims (85.2% to 83.4%) when they filed within one year of separation. Across all races, Veterans who file after one year had significantly lower grant rates. Among later filers, white Veterans have higher grant rates than Black Veterans (68.4% to 65%).



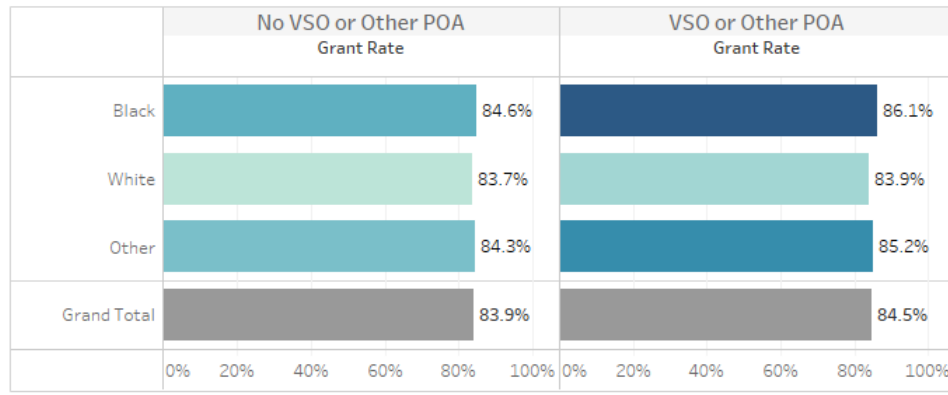
This evidence shows that filing a mental health claim within a year of separation increases the likelihood that the Veteran will be service-connected for a mental health condition. Veterans who filed within a year were also much more likely to be scheduled for a mental health examination, and without an examination, the likelihood of VA granting service connection was significantly lower.

There has not been a grant rate gap by race since 2011 for Veterans who filed within one year of discharge. The driver is a VBA policy that automatically provides a general medical exam or Separation Health Assessment (SHA) to a Veteran who files a claim within one year of discharge.

VA recognizes that the gap remains for Veterans who filed more than a year after discharge and will continue to assess and take action to reduce it. Almost 4 in 10 of the first-time mental health claims VA received between 2016-2020 were filed more than a year after discharge. Fortunately, Veterans filed within one year at much higher rates than in the past — from 11% of Veterans discharged in 2006 to 44% in 2021.

Power of Attorney Effect

Veterans who use an accredited Veteran Service Organization (VSO) or other power of attorney (POA) also have higher grant rates for mental health claims than when they file on their own. VSOs are broadly beneficial and improve rating outcomes regardless of when a Veteran files a claim, even among repeated filers. Veterans who submit a claim more than one year after discharge using an accredited VSO or POA have better service-connection outcomes than those who do not.



While the likelihood of using an accredited POA – and the benefit of it – is not significantly different across race, ethnicity, or gender, this finding could help further reduce disparities in grant rates by making sure that Black Veterans are aware of this trend and have access to VA-accredited VSOs. VA-recognized organizations and VA-accredited individuals may be found here: [OGC - Accreditation Search \(va.gov\)](https://www.va.gov/ogc-accreditation-search/).

How VA is Using these Insights to Eliminate Disparities

In response to these new findings, VA will taking immediate and aggressive action to eliminate this gap and ensure that Black Veterans get the benefits they deserve. Specifically, VA will:

1. Visit 15 or more Department of Defense Installations to work with Transitioning Service Members: In 2024, VA will have leaders directly engage with participants of the VA One-Day training during scheduled site visits to military installations to discuss the report of disparity findings between Black and white Veterans when filing for mental health related claims and the recommended actions, including encouraging Veterans to file early and work with an accredited Power of Attorney or Veteran Service Officer. These will include sites across the United States and overseas.
2. Update the Transition Curriculum for VA One-Day Training: Throughout each year, VA delivers a training to thousands of transitioning service members at over 330 installations worldwide – and VA will update the curriculum to highlight the importance of early filing for compensation benefits, especially mental health claims. VBA will develop and implement training for all three modalities of delivery of the Transition Assistance Program course – including in-person, virtual instructor-led, and online – and educate our trainers on the importance and results of the findings so they are prepared to engage transitioning service members. While this curriculum is being developed, VA will issue a training bulletin to our contractors to immediately provide information on study findings so they can begin to inform transitioning service members without delay.
3. Enhance our VA Solid Start call experience: The VA Solid Start Program is designed to enhance the transitioning service member experience by contacting them periodically during their first year of separation to ensure transitioning servicemembers have true connections to VA’s benefits and services. VBA will revise VA Solid Start call scripts to actively inform recently transitioned service members of the benefits of filing early and working with an accredited POA or VSO. VBA will also develop and implement training for our VA Solid Start call center representatives to educate them on the study findings.

4. Work with VA-accredited VSOs to make sure that Black Veterans have access to their services: VA has strong relationships with Veteran Service Organizations, and VBA leadership will engage with Veteran Service Organizations leaders to share the findings of the study and to exchange ideas on how to eliminate this disparity.
5. Conducting direct outreach to Black Veterans to encourage them to apply for VA benefits: In recent years, VA has worked to engage Black Veterans to encourage them to file for the benefits they've earned. As a result, under the PACT Act, Black Veterans are [applying for benefits](#) at a higher rate than historic baselines. Throughout 2024, VA will work to continue this trend by working with directly with Black Veterans and organizations to spread the word about this study and encourage Veterans to apply.

Conclusion

Moving forward, VA will continue to work aggressively to learn from these findings and use them to eliminate disparities in grant rates for mental health conditions. VA will also continue to study these gaps so we can identify how best to eliminate them. As always, VA's goal is to ensure that every Veteran gets access to the world-class care and benefits they've earned – and we will never settle for anything less.