526 Disability Claims for Increase

What We Wanted to Learn

The Problem | The Product | Why This Testing | Research Objective

Veterans can technically complete online applications, *eBenefits works*.

But they find the process overwhelming and confusing, **and so they don't.**

An end-to-end flow for submitting claims for increase

In which Veterans should:
1. Feel supported
2. Know what they need to do
3. **Know what they don't**
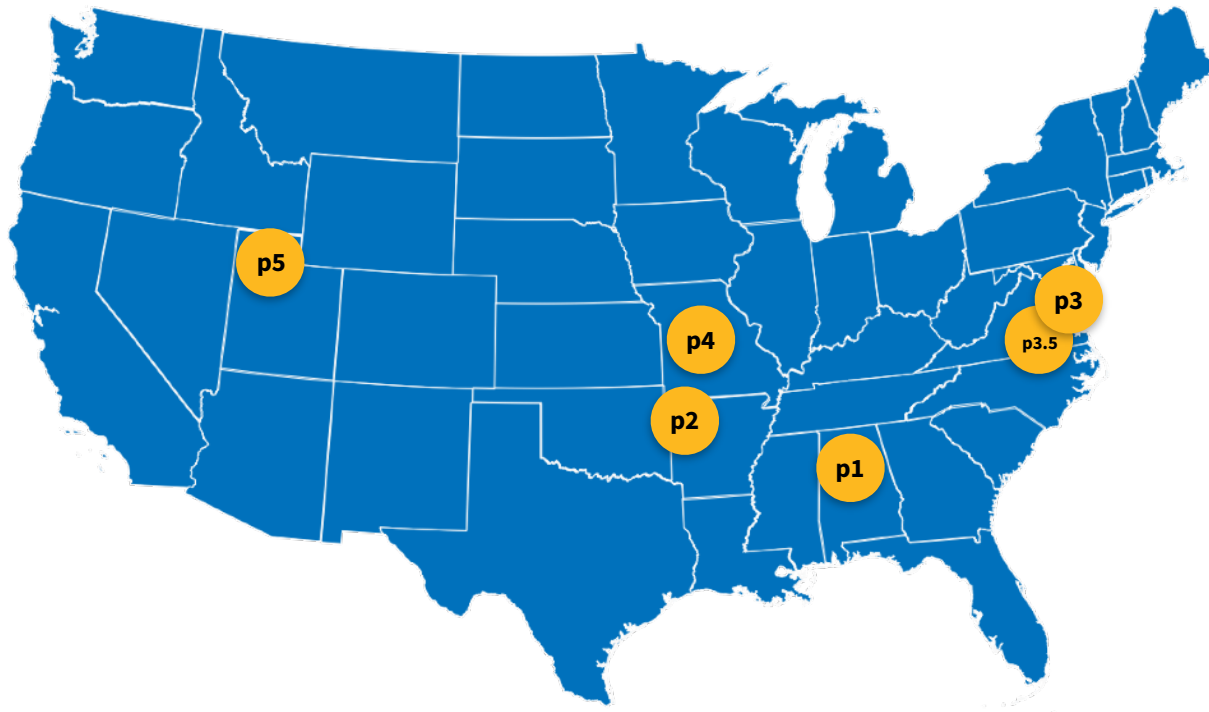
Why This Testing?

We want to validate that our rough draft flow solves these problems for Veterans before we build it.

Specifically where in the prototype do Veterans feel supported and confident, and where do they still struggle?

What We Did

Participants | Research Process | Prototype

Participants

2 women
4 men

2
branches

26-71
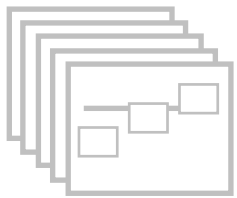years old

5 filed claims
1 in progress
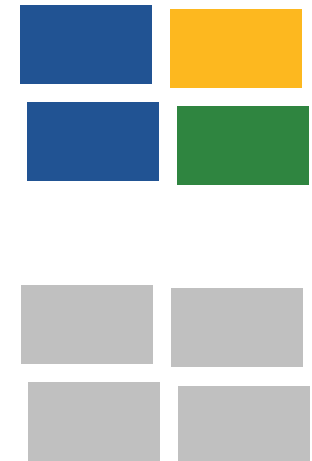
1
traumatic
brain injury

Research Process

Moderated
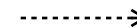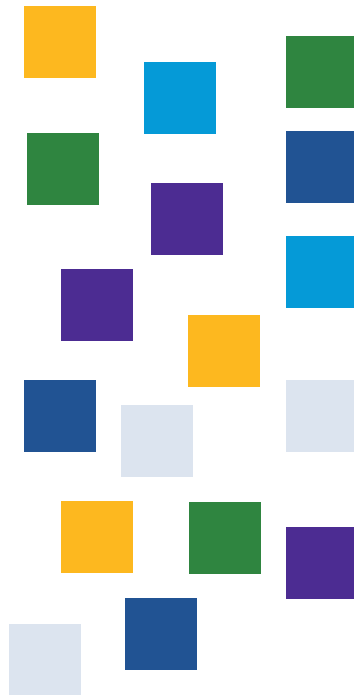Usability Tests

Observations
& Quotes

Themes

Findings &
Open Questions

5 Remote

1 In-person
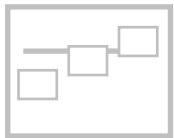
Prototype
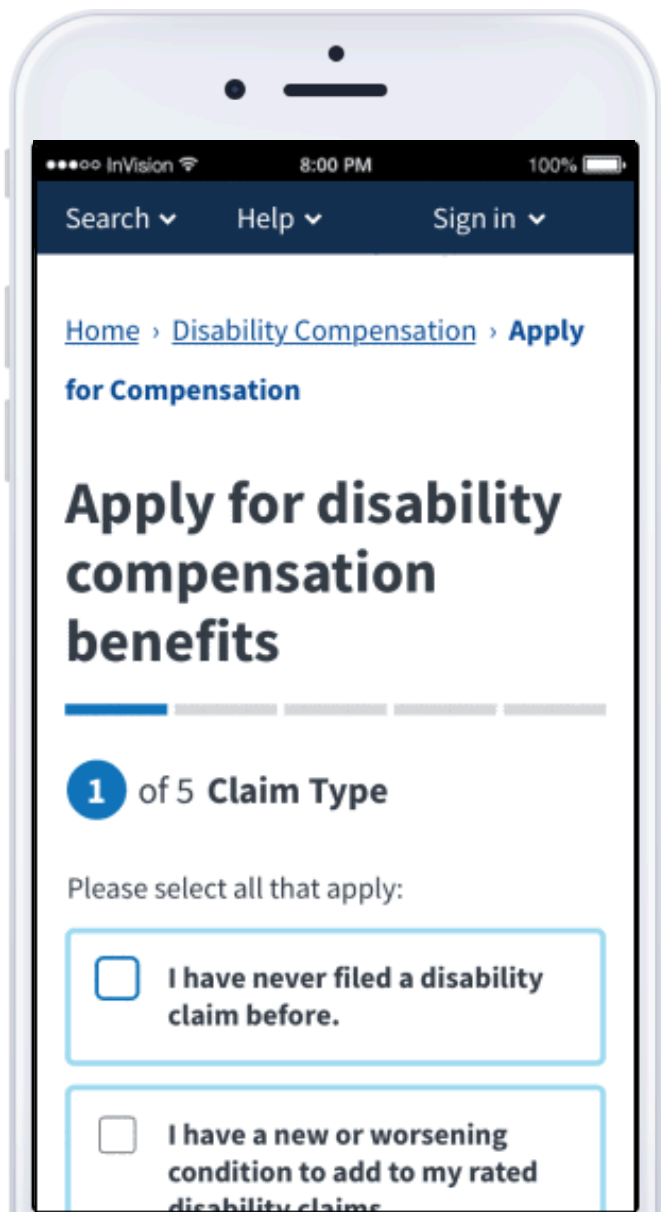
We design products to work on devices from phone sized to desktop. We start design with the most restrictive case make sure we aren't leaving anyone behind.

We also internally test our code for accessibility before launch and review with the 508 office afterwards.

What We Learned

Overall, people were successful and comfortable with this flow.

But there are challenges...

"It seems like it's helping to combat all the frustrations and having to overcome all that by making it simple clicks and pretty straightforward. Very self-explanatory, so it does ease the burden."
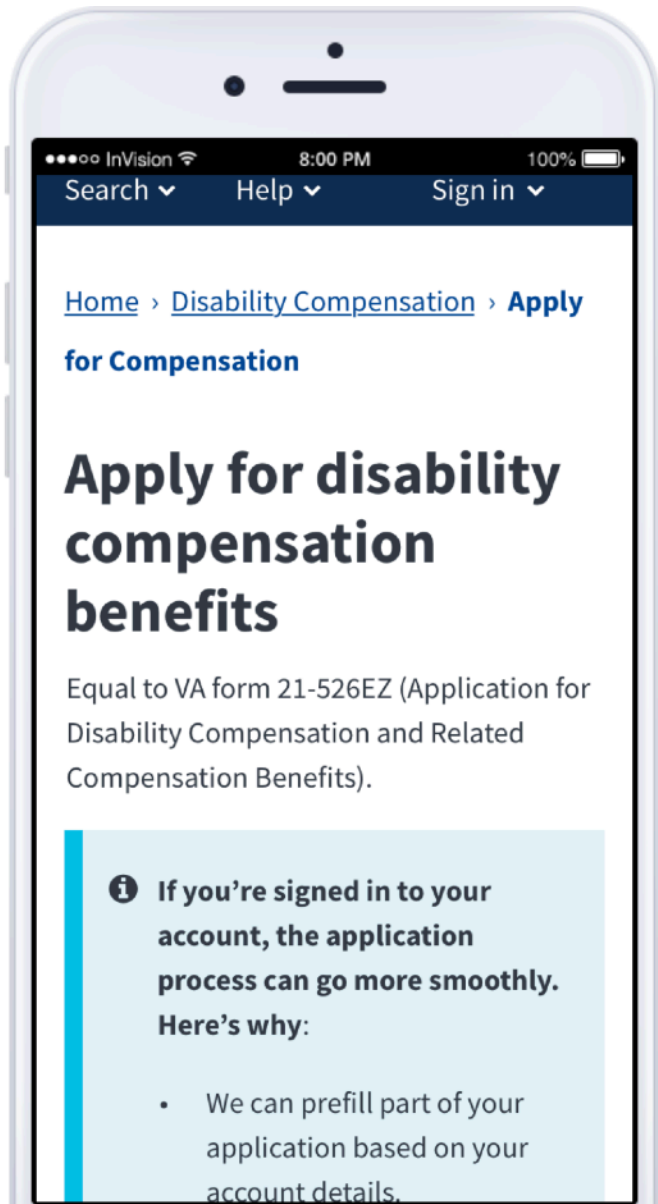
Want to log in first

4/6 Wanted to log in before starting.

If users create an account on id.me and then get redirected elsewhere, that's an unnecessary burden.

"I would sign in first. By signing in, you'd have things that are associated with you that might be available and you can pull in."
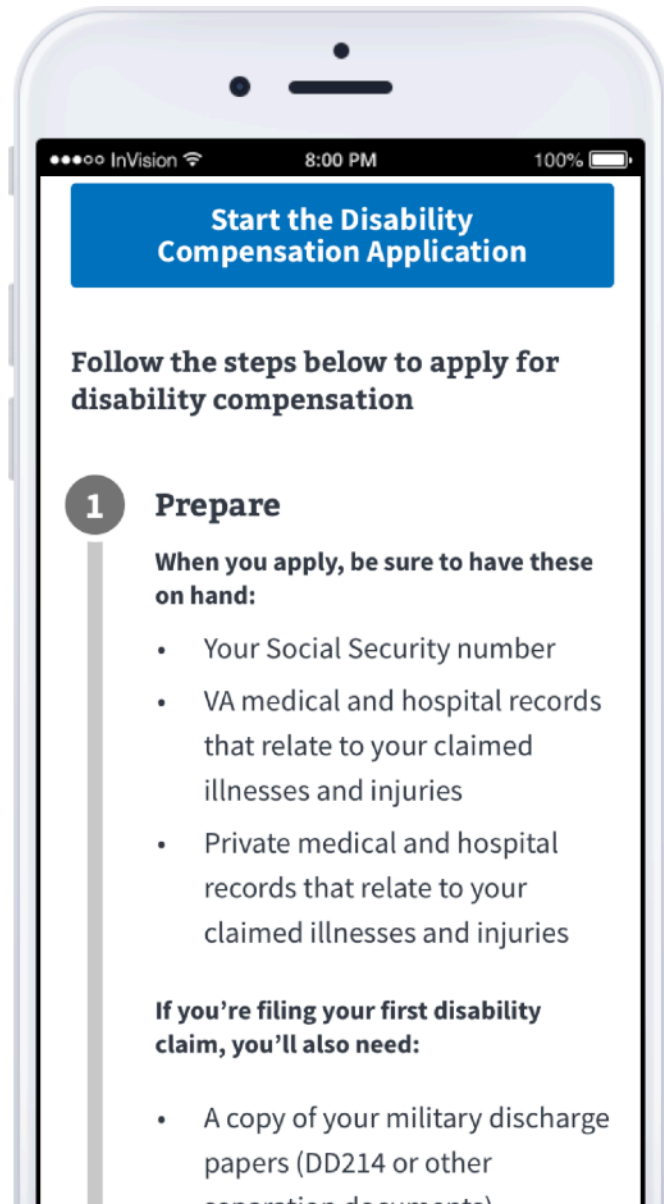
How do I begin "updating" my claim?

2/6 Weren't sure where to start to update an existing claim.

"It says 'Apply for a disability claim', but I need a button for 'Upgrade your disability claim'. If I already have a disability claim, do I apply again? Seems redundant."

"I would go to help and to see if there's any information about how I could do it, a link or something. And then I'd type in 'extension on benefits'."

Finding 3
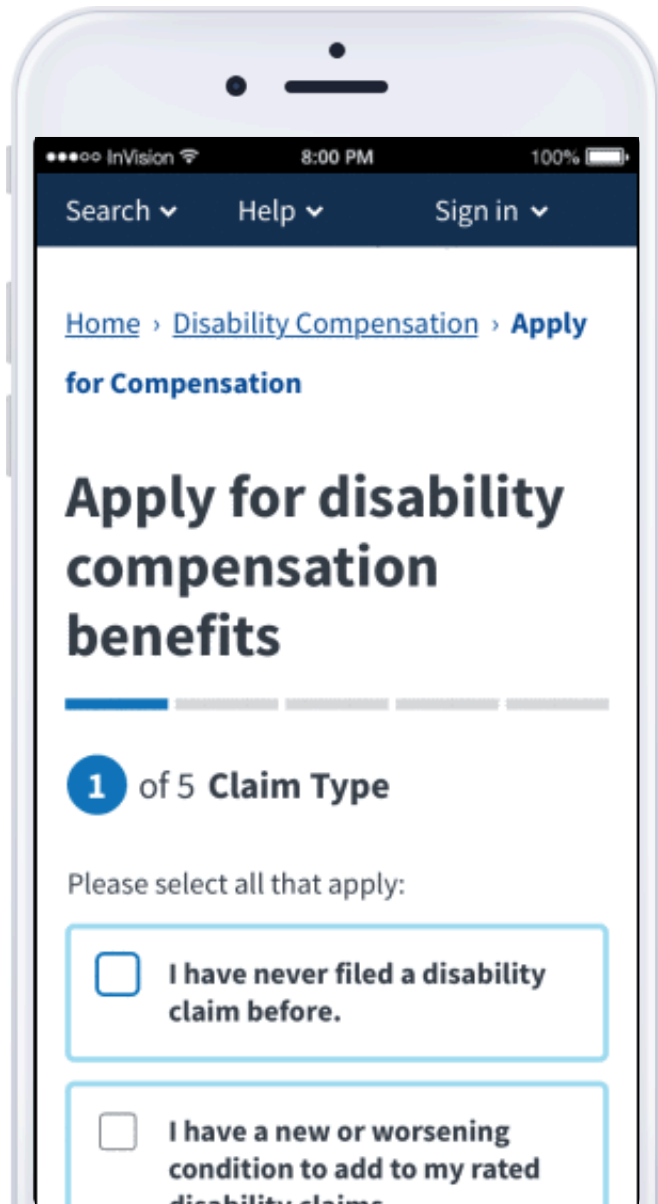
Self-selection was successful

5/6 Chose the correct path for submitting a claim for increase
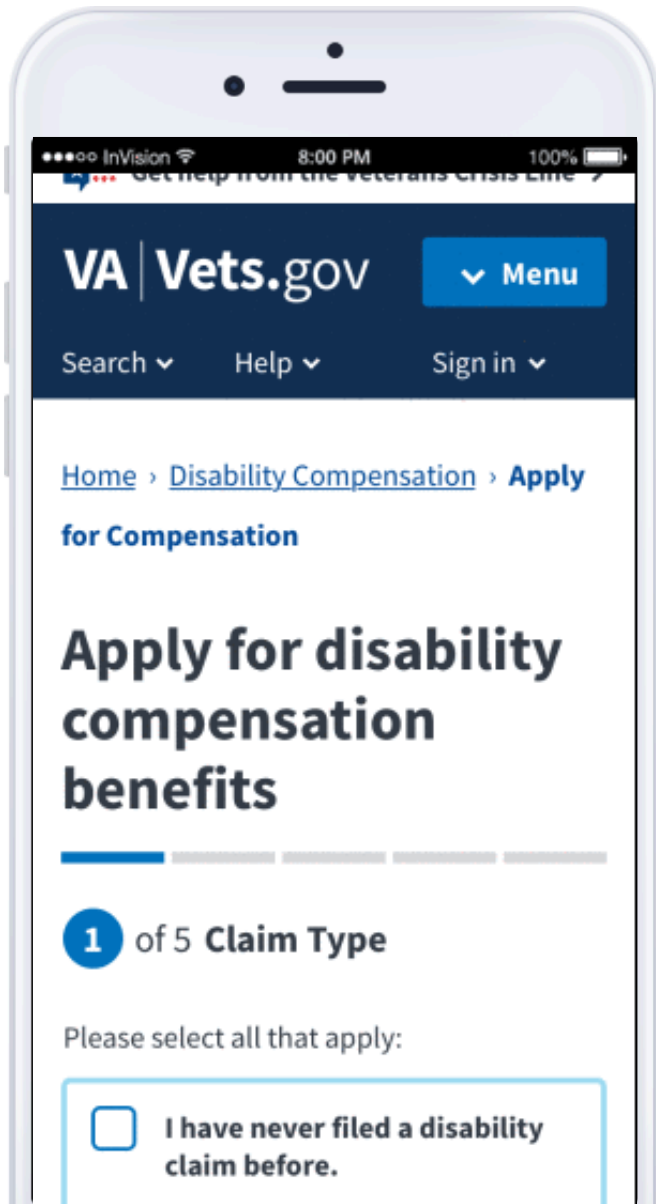
Some frustration with redirect to eBenefits

Plan to soft-launch with **only claims for increase** on Vets.gov and redirect to eBenefits for other types of claims.

1/6   Expressed a high degree of frustration with being redirected to eBenefits for unsupported claim types.

1/6   Expected the eBenefits process to be quick and pick up where she left off.

21

"Is that just something to fluster people with? That you have to go back into eBenefits to do that? To me it's very frustrating. I would find it flummoxing. If I saw this, I'd be pissed off.

I'd either quit or find somebody to do the work for me."

"I don't know where I'm going to go, but I'm thinking it's going to be a fast process.

I'm thinking that you already know me and I'm adding something new so I don't have to fill out a bunch of paperwork. I just have to fill out the basics, anything that's new."

Put self selection of claim type first so we can mitigate unnecessary sign-in burden.

Adjust content to be more clear about what you can do here.

Adjust main call to action.

Finding 5
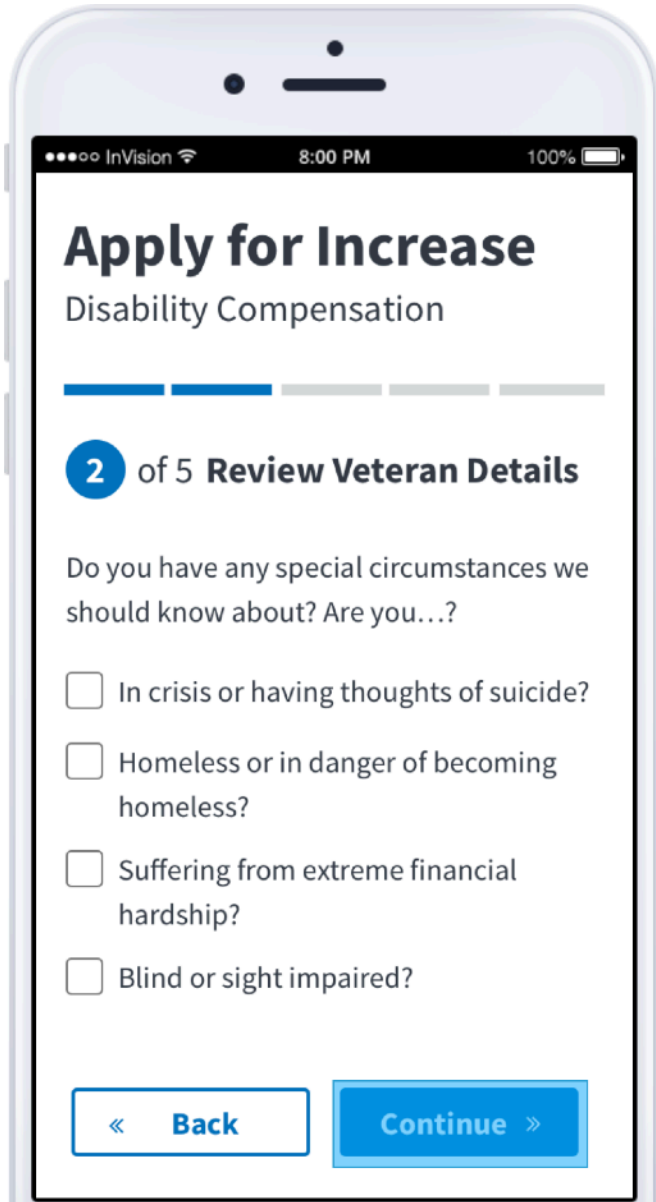
Great opportunity, and risk

5/6 Participants expected someone to proactively contact them if they indicated any of these options

3/6 Participants saw these questions as a good sign that VA cares about Veterans.

"I would guess the VA is becoming more conscious of the actual problems that a lot of Vets are having and in order to streamline the process and take out a lot of work if they are truly having mental health issues, homeless, suffering from financial hardship, blind or sight impaired."

"It's not like 'let me read about resources and then I might not kill myself.' They need someone to talk to them. That's what I would hope would happen. Plus... if my PTSD is getting worse, I'm probably having thoughts of suicide, so if I'm here..."

Provide inline help if someone checks a box.

Set expectations about what happens based on a selection.

Can we do anything more helpful in real time to respond? Discuss with Comp Services and Crisis Line.

Finding 6
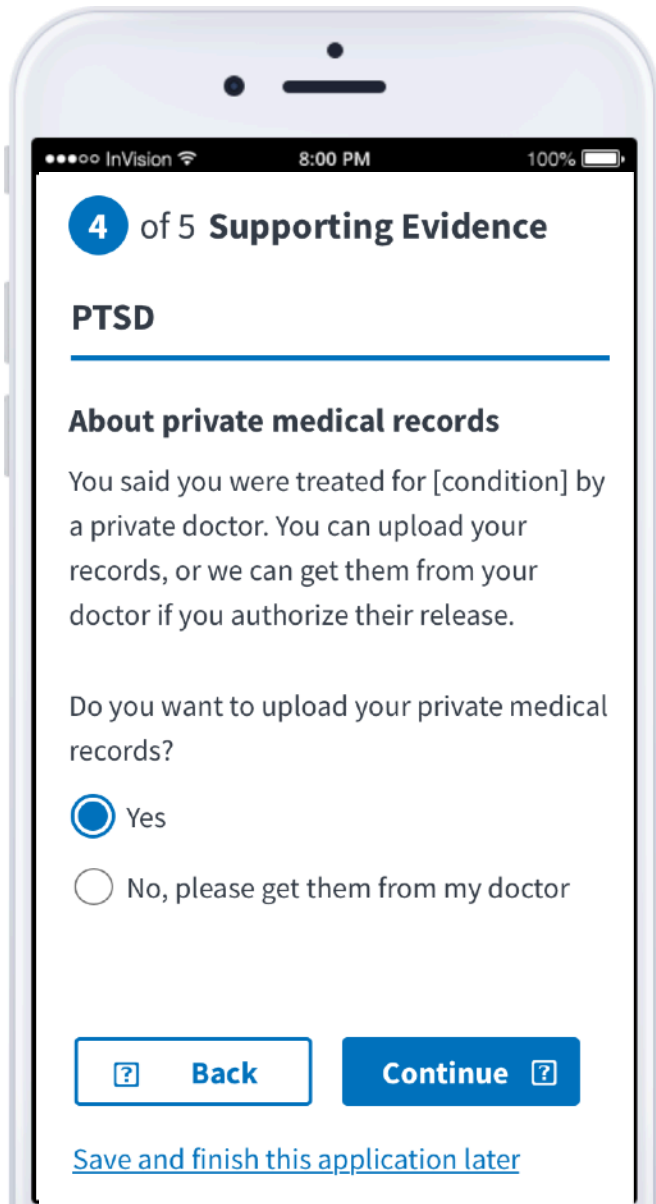
Mixed confidence in retrieval

3/6 Participants were glad to see that VA could do the work for them.

3/6 Worried that VA process might be slower.

"VA shouldn't have to ask for the medical records - they should already have them"

"That makes it easier for them to go get the records than me having to get the records, bring the records in."

"God knows how long it will take them to ask somebody for something, so I would do the leg work myself and upload it... I would absolutely not trust the VA to take care of that in a timely manner."

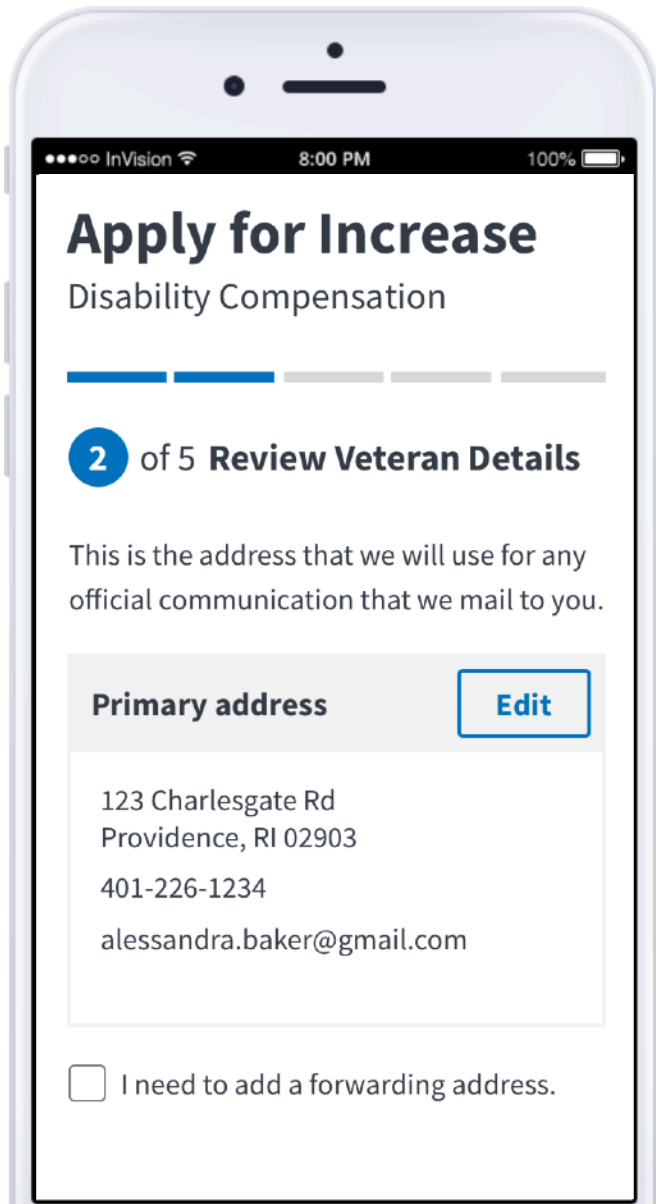If possible, more transparency about how long it takes VA to get records.

Determine what makes it easier for VA to process claims. Encourage the behavior we want. Discuss with Comp Services.

Intersperse the reasoning behind why we are asking for records.

Confusion with moving

4 / 6

Participants didn't know how to handle the scenario of moving addresses in the future.

The design intended to use "I need to add a forwarding address" for this.

Apply for Increase
Disability Compensation

2 of 5 **Review Veteran Details**

This is the address that we will use for any official communication that we mail to you.

Primary address | Edit

123 Charlesgate Rd
Providence, RI 02903

401-226-1234

alessandra.baker@gmail.com

☐ I need to add a forwarding address.

Direct, action-oriented language

4 of 5 **Treatment Records**

Other supporting documents

If you have other documents you want to upload here that you think help indicate this worsened condition, you may do so here, although the only thing VA needs from you are your medical records. We will retrieve those VAMC or Private Records for you if you indicated those details on the previous screens, so there may not be anything you need to upload here.

Do you have any other supporting documents to add?
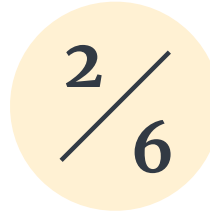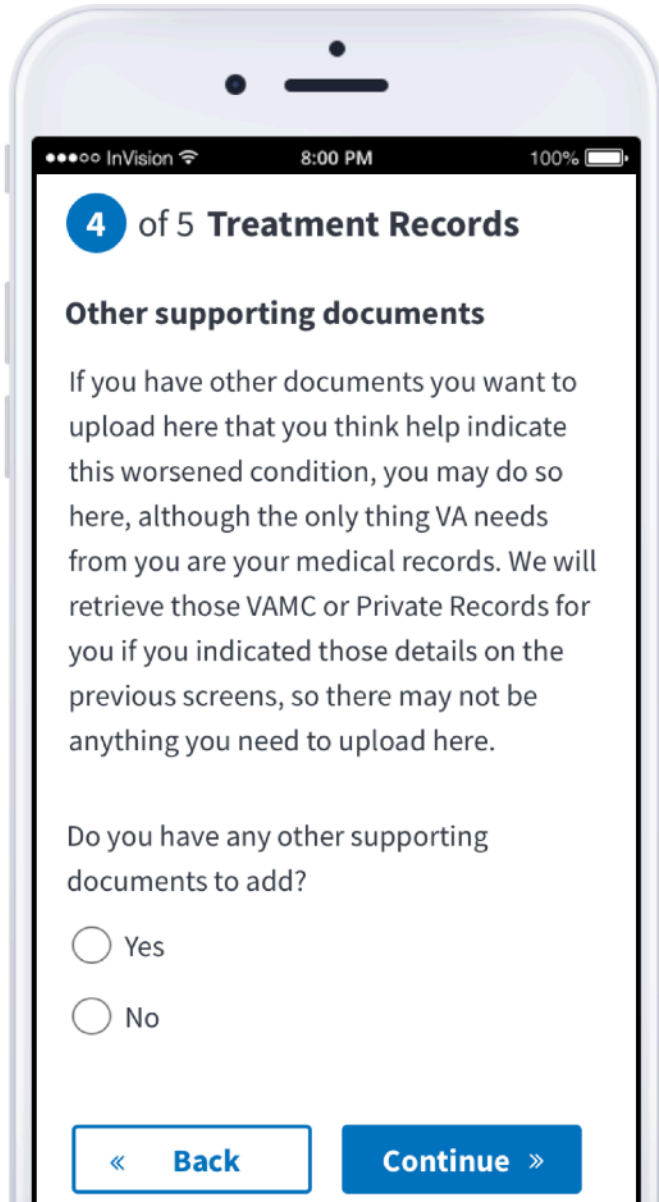
○ Yes

○ No

« **Back**   **Continue** »

Other supporting documents

VA has a problem with people over-submitting supporting documents. This slows down processing time.

How can we reduce the burden to the VA while allowing Veterans to feel they can properly support their claims?
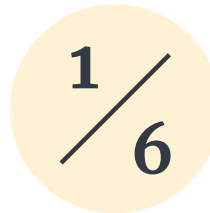
Finding 8 *continued*

2/6 Chose not to add any documents.

2/6 Would add one or two documents.

1/6 Wanted to add everything possible.

2/6 Weren't sure what kinds of documents to add.

●●●○○ InVision 📶　　8:00 PM　　100% 🔋

4 of 5 **Treatment Records**

Other supporting documents

If you have other documents you want to upload here that you think help indicate this worsened condition, you may do so here, although the only thing VA needs from you are your medical records. We will retrieve those VAMC or Private Records for you if you indicated those details on the previous screens, so there may not be anything you need to upload here.

Do you have any other supporting documents to add?

○ Yes

○ No

« **Back**　　**Continue** »

"*More is always better in this kind of case with the government. Even if it doesn't help, it doesn't harm.*"

"I don't know what other supporting documents they would be. It was so thorough leading up to this point. I wouldn't know what other documents you would need. I would just click no."

Determine contextually-appropriate guidance on supplemental documents. Discuss with Comp Services.

Clearly communicate about what not to submit.

Finding 9
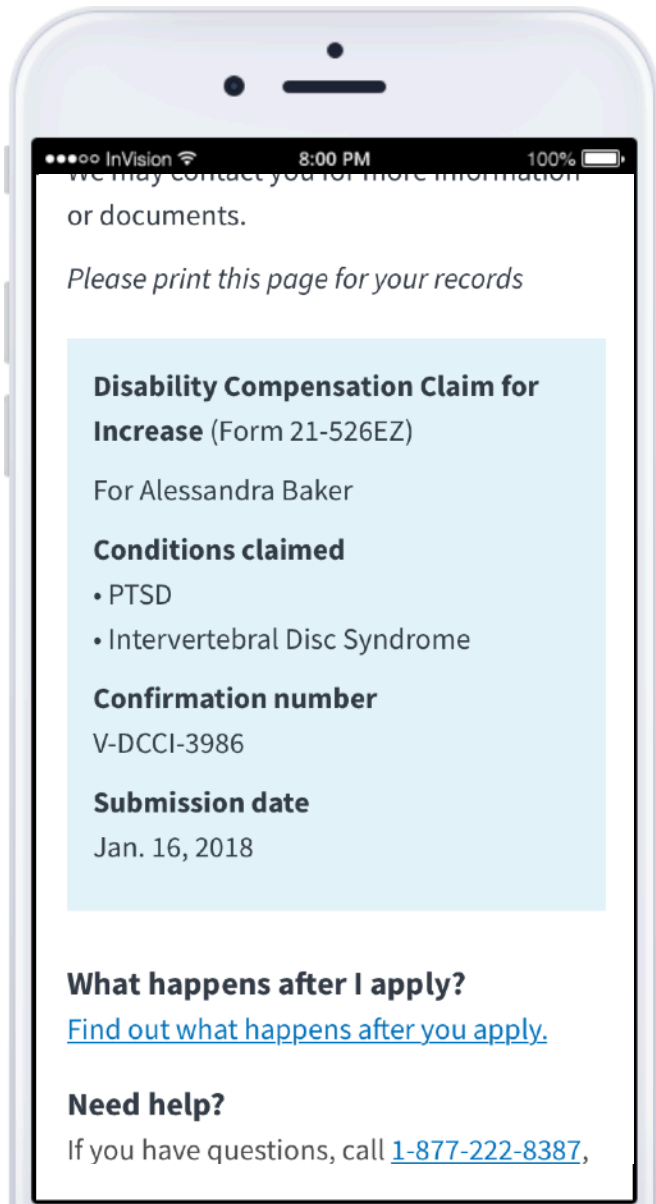
What next?

3/6   Would save the submission information for their records.

6/6   Wanted more information at this step.

- What happens after 95 days?
- How can I check on my claim status?

"*I guess I would certainly be marking my calendar at 95 days and wondering who I follow up with or who reaches out to me.*"

"Do you have something that sends out an email or a status bar of where [the claim] is?

What a lot of us are used to is doing what we are told and waiting until we are told to move. So I like to see where things are in the process."

More helpful guidance about what people can expect:

- Where to go to find updates
- When you might expect to see progress

Collaborate with one of our other teams building electronic Veteran notifications.

Paper is still preferred by some

As seen in other studies, some Veterans, especially those with memory or cognitive challenges wanted to complete the form on paper or have someone personally help with them navigate the process.

But we want to make sure that people who are able to can complete the process in a self-service way.

"In my case when dealing with TBIs and stuff like that, sometimes it's a lot easier to work with a hard copy than to always have the computer screen so you can double check yourself."

Add context to labels to help Veterans remember where they are in the process.

Open Items

Open items for investigation

1. What kinds of supporting documents and how many will be helpful or harmful to claims?
2. How can we respond to "personal flash" submissions (on homelessness, thoughts of suicide, extreme poverty, vision impairments)?
3. Questions for CSRA
   1. 4142 / eBenefits
   2. Related conditions
4. To what extent can we legally diverge from the text of paper forms?
   1. "If my consent to access my records is limited, that limit is written here"

Next Steps

Next Steps

1. Begin development
2. Another round of testing when we have code in staging to validate that we've addressed the problems

DIGITAL SERVICE at VA

Thank you

Appendices

Participant Details | Additional Findings | Findings for Other Projects

Participant Details

35 – 44 | Female | African–American | Southern US | Air Force, 2002 – 2008

Disability benefits: Receiving benefits. Didn't realize she had to apply separately for VA benefits after leaving the military. Took 2 years to get a rating. Had help from VSO / VA and mother. Has a neurological condition.

Key findings: "That's kind of sucky [that you can't apply for an appeal here] because it was easy working in this program."

"Is this just for outside doctors? I would like to think that they already have the VA documents. I mean they have everything else from the VA records so far."

Disability benefits: In process of filing claim since end of November. 2 brothers who have filed claims are helping him. PTSD.

Key findings: [supplemental documents] "more is always better in this kind of case with the government. Even if it doesn't help, it doesn't harm."

"Normally you appeal anyway, is what I've heard the standard is from my brothers and some buddies. I've heard you appeal again no matter what."

"You'd rather not just share [PTSD issues] with the world. And talking about it's always hard, but if I could just submit it online, I wouldn't have to talk to anybody."

Disability benefits: Started a claim online ~3 years prior but didn't finish submitting it. Had help from a peer. Has had Rhinitis.

Key findings: Scrutinized the language on many pages.

Gravitated to "help" many times.

[confirmation screen] "95 days, I'm not sure if that's the weekend or just 95 business days."

[confirmation screen] "It would be nice if they had an expiration date. Meaning that your claim will be filed no later than this date. If it expires, like if they haven't received a claim by 95 days you'd probably have to reapply."

Disability benefits: Filed a claim independently 2 years ago after being nudged twice by his father. Tinnitus and hearing loss.

Key findings: "I'm curious to know what id.me is, it caught my attention since its green. I would investigate that to see if there's a smoother away of going through it to where if it's got... since I have the new iPhone with facial recognition, thumb recognition."

"As far as the suicide guide, I would expect a call from the suicide prevention line immediately."

Wanted to see status updates on the claim after submission via email and/or the web.

Disability benefits: Has a medical background. Filed before discharge and got scolded by superiors for asking for a physical. Has MS and a neurogenic bladder as a complication.

Key findings: Didn't trust MyHealtheVet to log in. "To me that's the VA health system and sometimes you become nothing more than a number they push through."

"In my case when dealing with TBIs and stuff like that, sometimes it's a lot easier to work with hard copy than to always have the computer screen so you can double check yourself." Would have abandoned the online process and gone to get an advocate for help at few points.

Disability benefits: Filed for disability in 2008 - 09 with help from a VSO. Hospitalized 3 times for hypercalcemia. Later a car accident introduced a spinal injury and TBI. Vocal surgery, eye surgery, kidney function problems.

Key findings: "I would wonder why I'd had to put this in because it was VA and you guys have the records so why do I have to put it in?"

"I use Veterans' Choice sometimes. So is Veterans' Choice a private doctor? He's not in a VA medical facility. He's in a private practice but the VA pays him."

[confirmation screen] "I don't that know many mobile users have a printer assigned. On my phone if I send an email to myself, then I could print it."

Additional Findings

Barriers to initial claim (confirmed earlier finding)

1. Not knowing about benefits available or application process
2. Confusion about eligibility
3. Superiors in active duty actively discouraged asking for VA physicals (new finding)
4. Issues using eBenefits
5. Long process after initial application

"They didn't give you much information leaving the military...

I thought that kind of just transitioned over to the VA. I didn't realize I had to reapply to the VA...

It wasn't until (I got really sick and needed to be in the VA system) that I was like, 'oh...'"

"I had to go in front of the hospital commander and the hospital sergeant major...

Well, they really chewed my ass for asking for a VA physical."

VA should already have this info (confirmed earlier finding)

2 / 6

Thought this process was unnecessary because VA should already have the information the forms are asking.
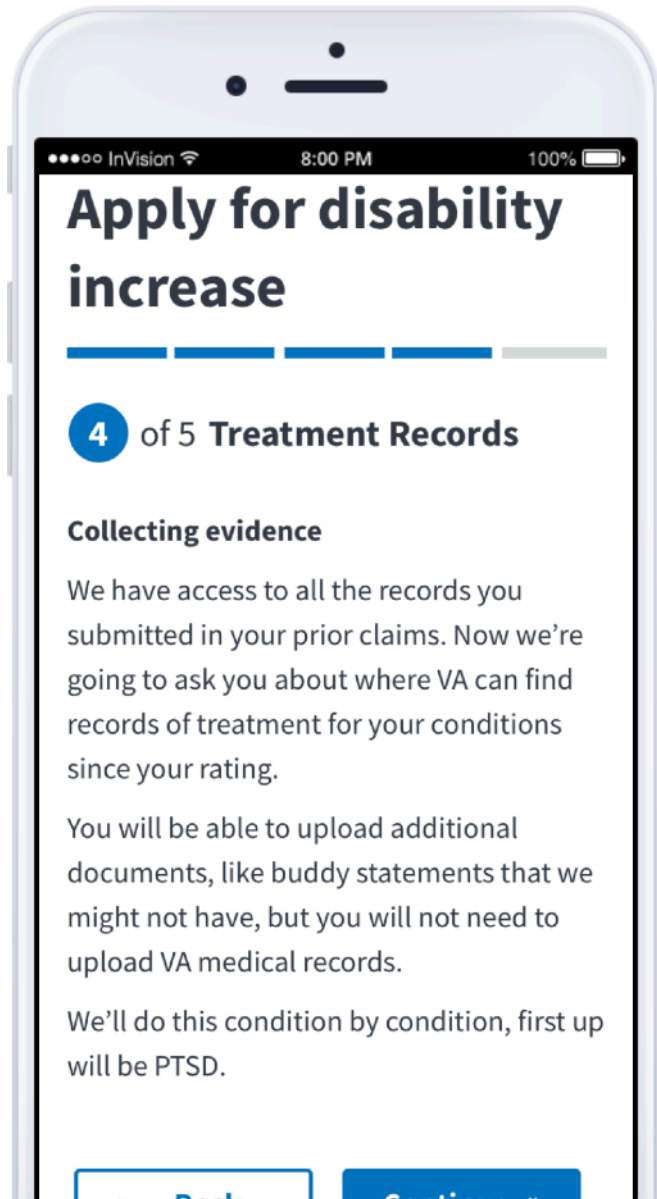
"If you have my records because it's all VA, why do I have to go through this?"

Watch for participants choosing one condition at a time and submitting multiple claims for increase

2/6

Chose only one condition and continued all the way through to submitting the claim.

Both mentioned their own personal conditions and may have lost the scenario, so findings are not conclusive.

Appeal everything

2/6 Would take an approach of appealing every decision.

"Normally you appeal anyway, is what I've heard the standard is from my brothers and some buddies. I've heard you appeal again no matter what, so that's when I'd use the appeal."

"A lot of times, I think it's a game with the VA. I think a lot of times they low ball you and people get disappointed and never go and file again and never argue the point."
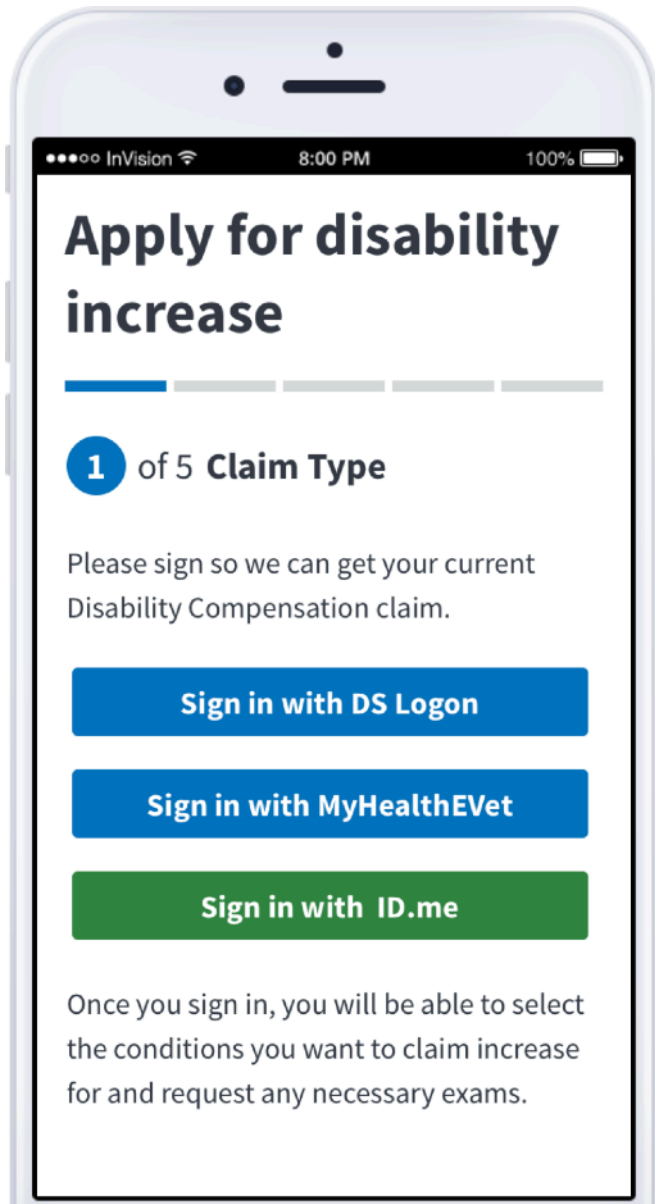
Login options

3/6 — Thought the choice of login method would have an effect that it would not.

1/6 — Wanted to create a new account on MyHealthEVet

"I don't know which one to sign in with. Is one more important than the other?"

"I would do the sign in with MHV because I'm claiming something health-wise or disability."

"I don't have a CAC card to do the DS logon, and I don't know what 'sign in with id.me' is, so my initial reaction would be to go into sign in with MHV and just hope there's a sign up or some sort of prompt for me to create an account."

Findings for Other Projects

"It would be great to have something like that (application process) for Veteran owned businesses too. I like that method of input. I just check the boxes. It's very simple."

"Do you have something that sends out an email or a status bar of where [the claim] is?

What a lot of us are used to is doing what we are told and waiting until we are told to move. So I like to see where things are in the process."

"You'd rather not just share [PTSD issues] with the world. And talking about it's always hard, but if I could just submit it online, I wouldn't have to talk to anybody."

"It would be nice if you could upload a file or a document here [claim received screen] on your own, essentially having your own file for tracking everything (correspondence with VA about your claim), like 'add to file' or 'archive'."

"It would be great if (for something that needs to be mailed) there was a green option of sending straight to email or 'go paperless'. That would probably make everything go a heck of a lot faster too."

"They didn't give you much information leaving the military...

I thought that kind of just transitioned over to the VA. I didn't realize I had to reapply to the VA...

It wasn't until (I got really sick and needed to be in the VA system) that I was like, 'oh...' "