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Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs): Frequently Asked Questions

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Veterans service organizations (VSOs) offer a range of services for veterans, servicemembers, dependents, and survivors. Some VSOs may provide programming for veterans in their communities, such as job fairs. Others may organize events to raise money for subsets of veterans, such as housing for homeless veterans. Some VSOs train individuals to represent claimants before the Department of Veterans Affairs and its Board of Veterans' Appeals. This report answers frequently asked questions about how VSOs are funded, administered, and connected to the federal government.

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What Are Veterans Service Organizations?

Veterans service organizations (VSOs) are organizations that aid and serve veterans, servicemembers, dependents, and survivors.

VSOs may fall into one or more of the following categories:

- Congressionally chartered organizations¹
- Organizations recognized by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)²
- Organizations recognized by VA to prepare, present, and prosecute claims³
- National organizations⁴
- State, county, or tribal governmental organizations⁵
- Regional or local organizations⁶
- Nonprofit organizations

There is no uniformly applied statutory definition of the term *VSO*, but the term may be defined in a specific way within certain statutes. For example, the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017 (P.L. 115-55) stated: “The term ‘veterans service organization’ means any organization recognized by the Secretary for the representation of veterans under section 5902 of title 38, *United States Code*.” Also, the Internal Revenue Code defines *veterans organization* for the purpose of determining tax status in Section 501(c). More information on this topic can be accessed from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) website on its “Veterans Organizations” page at <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/other-non-profits/veterans-organizations>.

For VSOs recognized by VA, regulatory descriptions of types of VSOs apply. These descriptions include “National organization,” “State organization,” “Tribal organization,” and “Regional or local organization.”⁷

What Services and Activities Are Supported by VSOs?

VSOs serve veterans, and their activities may encompass a range of services, such as:

- providing programming for veterans in their communities, such as job fairs;
- organizing events to raise money for subsets of veterans, such as housing for homeless veterans; or

¹ According to Title 36 of the *United States Code*, congressionally chartered organizations are those that have as their purpose the promotion of patriotic, charitable, historical, educational, or similar activities.

² 38 C.F.R. §14.628 (Recognition of organizations).

³ According to VA’s Office of General Counsel:

Under the authority granted in section 5902 of title 38, *United States Code*, VA may recognize organizations for the purpose of assisting claimants for VA benefits in the preparation, presentation, and prosecution of their claims. VA has implemented this authority in section 14.628 of title 38, *Code of Federal Regulations*, which prescribes the application requirements for national, state, and regional or local organizations.

⁴ 38 C.F.R. §14.628(a).

⁵ 38 C.F.R. §14.628(b)(1) (State organizations); 38 C.F.R. §14.628(b)(2) (Tribal organizations).

⁶ 38 C.F.R. §14.628(c).

⁷ 38 C.F.R. §14.628.

- providing access to accredited VSO representatives who can assist veterans, survivors, and dependents with applying for VA benefits, gathering evidence, filing claims, or communicating with VA.

Are VSOs Federal Agencies?

VSOs are not federal agencies. VSOs may be nonprofit organizations or state, county, tribal, or local government agencies. Employees who work for VSOs are not federal employees.

The VA Secretary may make space available in departmental facilities for individuals who work for national VSOs that have been recognized by the Secretary. According to the *U.S. Code*, “the Secretary may, in the discretion of the Secretary, furnish, if available, space and office facilities for the use of paid full-time representatives of national organizations so recognized.”⁸ Thus, while employees of some VSOs may be physically working at VA federal facilities, they are not federal workers. The VSO employees are positioned in these facilities to conveniently assist veterans, their spouses, and their beneficiaries.⁹

What Are Congressionally Chartered VSOs?

Congressionally chartered VSOs are organizations that Congress has granted charters through the enactment of public laws. Each congressionally chartered VSO is listed in Title 36, Subtitle II, of the *U.S. Code*.

A VSO is “congressionally chartered” if Congress has passed a law that chartered the organization. Provisions related to congressional charters are codified in Title 36, Subtitle II, of the *U.S. Code*. The last VSO chartered by Congress was for the National American Indian Veterans in 2024.¹⁰ Congress may amend existing charters, which often include conditions for membership, mission, or other characteristics of the particular VSO. Among the congressionally chartered VSOs are the American Legion,¹¹ which was chartered in 1919, and Disabled American Veterans (DAV),¹² which was chartered in 1932.

For a more detailed history of congressionally chartered VSOs, see CRS Report R47236, Title 36 Charters: The History and Evolution of Congressional Practices, which includes a section on the “Role of Charters in Federal Recognition of Veterans’ Organizations.”

What Are Recognized VSOs?

A recognized VSO is one that has been recognized by VA,¹³ which means that the organization has satisfied multiple requirements. Recognized VSOs may be national organizations, state organizations, regional or local organizations, or tribal organizations.¹⁴

⁸ 38 U.S.C. §5902(a)(2).

⁹ Federal employees are not allowed to be accredited VSO representatives. See CRS Report R46428, *Veterans Accredited Representatives: Frequently Asked Questions*, for more on accredited representatives.

¹⁰ See P.L. 118-31, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024, Section 5103.

¹¹ See 36 U.S.C. §§21701-21708.

¹² See 36 U.S.C. §§50301-50309.

¹³ See 38 C.F.R. §14.628(d).

¹⁴ See VA, “Recognition of Tribal Organizations for Representation of VA Claimants,” 82 *Federal Register* 6265, January 19, 2017.

Recognized VSOs are not individually named in the *U.S. Code*. Authority to determine that a VSO is “recognized” is granted to the VA Secretary in Title 38, Section 5902, of the *U.S. Code* (Recognition of representatives of organizations). The specific regulations that apply to recognized VSOs appear in Title 38, Section 14.628, of the *Code of Federal Regulations* (Recognition of organizations).¹⁵

The requirements to become a recognized VSO include, among others:

- Having a primary purpose to serve veterans
- Demonstrating commitment to veterans through a sizeable organizational membership or performance of veterans’ services
- Committing a significant portion of the organization’s assets to veterans’ services
- Submitting evidence that the organization will represent claimants or that it will inform claimants on how to find accredited representation

VSOs provide evidence to the VA Secretary that they meet these criteria through documentation (e.g., membership data, bylaws, description of services provided, and copies of their financial statements). If the organization provides VA claims services, evidence must be provided that the group has the capability to represent claimants before VA regional offices and VA’s Board of Veterans’ Appeals.

Do VSOs Provide Access to Accredited Representatives?

Some recognized VSOs provide access to accredited VSO representatives,¹⁶ who assist claimants with their affairs before VA. Recognized VSOs that do not represent claimants must illustrate how they will inform veterans of the limited services they can provide and how they will advise veterans on how to find accredited VSO representation.

Recognized VSOs submit applications of individuals seeking to become accredited representatives to VA’s Office of General Counsel (OGC) for accreditation. These applications include evidence that the individuals have been trained and meet specific qualifications.¹⁷ Recognized VSOs are also required to provide training.¹⁸ OGC periodically reviews the training provided by VSOs.¹⁹

Accredited VSO representatives may not charge their clients fees. For more information on accredited representatives, see CRS Report R46428, *Veterans Accredited Representatives: Frequently Asked Questions*.

¹⁵ For a history of the prior relationship between congressional charters and recognition, see CRS Report R47236, *Title 36 Charters: The History and Evolution of Congressional Practices*, which includes a section entitled “End to VA Linkage of Charters and Recognition.”

¹⁶ VA accredits three kinds of individuals: VSO representatives, attorneys, and agents. Often the collective term *accredited representatives* is used for all three kinds of representatives. Recognized VSOs provide access to accredited VSO representatives.

¹⁷ See 38 U.S.C. §§5901-5905; 38 C.F.R. §§14.626-14.637.

¹⁸ See 38 CFR 14.628(d)(1)(v)(B) which states, “A plan for recruiting and training qualified claim representatives, including the number of hours of formal classroom instruction, the subjects to be taught, the period of on-the-job training, a schedule or timetable for training, the projected number of trainees for the first year, and the name(s) and qualifications of the individual(s) primarily responsible for the training.”

¹⁹ Since FY2015, OGC has periodically requested and reviewed the training information for up to nine organizations at a time for sufficiency (communication from VA to CRS, March 3, 2026).

How Are VSOs Funded?

VSOs may receive funding from state, county, or private funding sources. They may also receive federal grants to support specific activities.

Do VSOs Provide Reports to the Federal Government?

Certain VSOs have various federal reporting requirements. Some may be required to file with the IRS.²⁰ Others may be required to submit reports as a result of provisions in their congressional charters.²¹ There is no uniform requirement for all VSOs or all congressionally chartered VSOs to submit reports.

Does VA Provide Grants Specifically for VSOs?

Most VA support is designed to aid individual veterans rather than organizations that serve veterans. On occasion, Congress has authorized VA to administer grants for which applications may be solicited from VSOs. For example, the Veterans Transportation Program notes the following requirement for applicants for its Highly Rural Transportation Grants:

Only a Veterans Service Organization (VSO) or a State Veterans Service Agency can apply, according to paragraphs (a)(2)(A)-(B) of section 307 of the 2010 Act. VSO must be recognized by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs for the representation of Veterans under section 5902 of Title 38, *United States Code*.²²

Do Other Federal Agencies Offer Grants for VSOs?

A VSO may be eligible for federal support based on the services it provides or the community needs it fills. It may also be eligible for funding if its IRS tax-exempt status category is among those deemed eligible for a particular grant.²³ For more information on funding, congressional offices may consult the CRS “Grants and Federal Assistance” page, available at <https://www.crs.gov/Resources/Grants>.

Where Can I Find a Directory of All VSOs?

No single resource provides a comprehensive list of all VSOs. The following resources provide lists of selected VSOs:

- VA, “Search Recognized VSOs,” <https://www.va.gov/ogc/apps/accreditation/index.asp>
- VA, “VSOs in Regional VA Offices,” <https://www.benefits.va.gov/vso/varo.asp>

²⁰ See CRS Report R40919, *An Overview of the Nonprofit and Charitable Sector* for filing information.

²¹ See, for example, 36 U.S.C. §§120101-120112, requiring an annual report to be submitted to Congress.

²² See VA, “Health Benefits,” https://www.va.gov/healthbenefits/vtp/grant_applicants.asp.

²³ For example, the Department of the Treasury issued a final rule on January 27, 2022, making 501(c)(19) organizations among the nonprofits eligible for funding from allocations from the Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund and the Coronavirus Local Fiscal Recovery Fund that were established under the American Rescue Plan Act (see 87 *Federal Register* 4338, January 27, 2022). More information on the Internal Revenue Code classifications for VSOs can be accessed from the IRS website’s “Veterans’ Organizations” page at <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/other-non-profits/veterans-organizations>, as well as from IRS Publication 3386, “Tax Guide for Veterans’ Organizations,” at <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p3386.pdf>.

- VA, “Directory of State Veterans Affairs Offices,”
https://discover.va.gov/external-resources/?_resource_type=state-veterans-affairs-office
- 36 U.S.C. Subtitle II: Patriotic and National Organizations

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