



# Survivor Experience Journey Map

As part of a project to revisit the Survivor experience, the Office of Survivors Assistance (OSA) and the Veterans Experience Office (VEO) collaborated to build upon our understanding of the Survivor experience in accessing VA Survivor benefits and services. This 2024 Survivor Journey Map provides a framework to use in understanding the unique journey of the Survivor. It is meant to capture the context of, and expand upon, the last journey map developed in 2019, adding greater fidelity to the nuances and depth of the Survivor experience in 2024.

**KEY**

JOURNEY PHASE

Journey moment

Bright Spot

Challenge

Emotion curve  
Positive and negative emotions

PHASES	PRIOR TO DEATH			COPING WITH LOSS			APPLYING FOR BENEFITS			ADJUSTING TO THE NEW NORMAL	
MOMENTS	Preparing for End of Life	Loved One Passes Away	Notification of Death	Looking for Support	Navigating Resources	Preparing to apply	Completing the Application	Waiting for Claims Decision	Notification of Claims Approval or Denial	Receiving Benefits	Monitoring Benefits
WHAT HAPPENS HERE	Pre-death planning is often not a priority. Survivors of Veterans lack knowledge and understanding about eligibility and how to access VA Survivor benefits.	Survivors are in shock and disbelief. They seek guidance from the VA, navigating a complex system while managing family affairs and funeral arrangements.	The Veteran's death triggers important tasks for the Survivor. Tasks need to be addressed quickly and include managing notification requirements and handling financial, medical, and personal implications.	Survivors seek assistance from anyone who can help and look to build emotional support networks to navigate the VA Survivor benefit claims process.	Grieving Survivors look for available resources that they can leverage to assist in accessing Survivor benefits.	Survivors apply for benefits without the support of experts to guide them which can cause unnecessary struggles and delays.	Survivors expect a smooth application process but face challenges due to complex language, lengthy forms, and gaps in benefit knowledge, often requiring third-party assistance.	Survivors' waits for claims can take up to two years and a lack of status updates can lead to uncertainty and frustration.	Survivors experience a range of emotions from relief to stress when the approval or denial of the claim is shared.	Survivors experience a significant adjustment to their new life when benefits are approved, impacting their families' future.	Survivors' continued awareness of Survivor benefits is necessary to ensure eligibility and manage complexities like remarriage or children becoming independent.
BRIGHT SPOTS	<div><div>+</div><div>Emotion curve</div></div> <div> "It was all set up by my husband; my youngest son took care of everything."</div>	<div> "VA did well; Doctor and Nurse reached out. Doctor was caring and went out of his way to help."</div>	<div> "I found the email from the VA helpful after death."</div>	<div> "The doctor told me about grief counseling [outside of VA]."</div> <div> "VSOs [Veteran Service Organizations] were most helpful at the county level and helped [Survivors] to be successful."</div>	<div> "Found VA very helpful [directing] to download forms."</div>	<div> "VSO was able to answer all questions."</div>	<div> "Claims submitted with VSO more accurate and able to be processed in a timely manner."—Subject Matter Expert, VA Pension Management Center</div>	<div> "In some ways it felt good to fight for him [in the appeals process]."</div>	<div> "Getting these benefits are a huge help and relief for my family."</div>	<div> "I applaud the VA because there was no other place to get the help I needed; they have taken very good care of me."</div>	<div> "Good time to have VA connect regarding [Dependents Educational Assistance] when children get ready to go off to college."</div>
CHALLENGES	<div> "Until you effectively involve families in healthcare, you will not reach the Survivors."</div>	<div> "I felt lost due to the lack of formal guidance on benefits, which made the grieving process even harder."</div>	<div> "Taking back money sent to vet; it can leave a bad taste."</div> <div> "If you don't know what is available it is hard to access the benefits."</div>	<div> "It would be nice to have someone reach out from the VA to assist you, because not all funeral homes are aware of VA benefits."</div>	<div> "When going through grief the mind doesn't register [new information] very well."</div>	<div> "I got someone to help and they just dumped information on me instead of guiding me through the process."</div>	<div> "The 534 and 534EZ for [Dependent and Indemnity Compensation] are very long and hard to read."</div> <div> "Many VSOs are backed up 2-3 weeks."</div>	<div> "I came to feeling that I would have to give up hope."</div> <div> "I submitted all of my paperwork to receive benefits, but it takes so long to get a claim through. I worry about bills, and I don't feel the VA cares about me."</div>	<div> "I'm not looking forward to going before the [Appeals Board] judge."</div> <div> "Nothing like a good fight to make you feel like you're doing something."</div> <div> "I hate hearing 'you are not a Veteran' even though I have lived experience."</div>	<div> "I wasn't able to tell creditors when my benefit check was going to come in."</div>	<div> "Families may forget and miss a deadline [to apply for benefits]."</div> <div> "It would be nice if VA reached out when the child turned 18 as it affects their benefits."</div>
MOMENTS THAT MATTER	Survivors who have done pre-death planning have a much better experience understanding and accessing VA Survivor benefits.	At the time of the Veterans passing Survivors are experiencing extreme grief and have a heightened expectation of VA's role as a leader in supporting and guiding their journey.	Untethered Survivors are likely unaware of VA services and Survivor benefits, risking missed opportunities for receiving them.	Access to immediate personal assistance following the death of a Veteran is a pivotal moment as Survivors begin to navigate the complex VA benefits application process.	Limited awareness and understanding of VA Survivor benefits, coupled with grief, overwhelm Survivors, hindering their ability to access and use available resources effectively.	Survivors often lack awareness of available VA Survivor benefits and their eligibility status.	VA application forms are complex and difficult to complete, requiring expert assistance from VSOs or other supporters.	Survivors contend with lengthy claim processing times, up to two years, leading to significant emotional and financial stress as they wait for a final decision.	Survivors experience a significant and liberating moment with the approval of their claim for benefits, signifying the end of a challenging application process. Survivors denied benefits can face a daunting appeals process.	Survivors approved for VA benefits are grateful for the recognition and support from the VA, and want options to give back to the Survivor community and assist others struggling through this difficult phase.	Survivors need assistance to actively monitor changes in their eligibility for benefits over time, i.e. PACT Act, Remarriage, children turning 18, etc.
OPPORTUNITIES	<b>Engaging Families Early in Pre-Death Planning</b>  Early access to benefits information enhances Survivors' understanding and readiness for future transitions.	<b>Delivering Compassionate and Empathetic Support</b>  Timely, compassionate support is crucial to help Survivors cope and address immediate needs.	<b>Proactive Outreach to Survivors</b>  Survivors and their families need outreach that provides comprehensive support in a proactive and empathetic way.	<b>Connect Survivors to Support Networks</b>  The successful identification and utilization of support systems and networks are key determinants in a Survivor's ability to navigate the complexity of accessing Survivor benefits	<b>Clearly Communicate to Prepare and Connect Survivors</b>  Have clear VA resources with easy to navigate websites, written materials, and processes that set the tone and prepare them as they begin this complicated journey.	<b>Assist Survivors in Identifying Appropriate Support Systems</b>  Grieving Survivors are in need of structured expert guidance to successfully navigate the Survivor benefits process.	<b>Streamline the Application process for Survivor benefits</b>  Streamlined processes and the right expert guidance through the application process can support the Survivor having a smooth application experience.	<b>Empower Survivors to Track Status Throughout Claims Process</b>  Up-to-date and accurate claims status that is visible to Survivors can alleviate frustration while waiting for the decision.	<b>Empathy for Grieving Survivors during Claim Rejection</b>  Survivors may enter a strenuous cycle of repeated reapplications or navigating complex appeals following a claims rejection and need empathy, efficiency and support during these processes.	<b>Continuous Support for Survivors and Children</b>  The ongoing need for clear guidance and support to manage benefits underscores the necessity for a robust communication system, providing Survivors and children with clear information on the delivery and timing of their benefits.	