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Can you get a medical waiver for hearing in the military

Three years ago, I wrote an article detailing my personal difficulties securing a medical waiver through three military medical rejections. Since publishing the article, I have had the privilege to speak with over 100 applicants just like me — people who want to serve and have something to contribute but who have been medically rejected — about the barriers they ran into. Through those conversations, I learned many lessons regarding common myths and misperceptions about the military medical waiver process and have even been fortunate to assist with some successful waiver appeals. This article aims to demystify the medical waiver process and give applicants the information that will help them get to yes. Far too few people know, for example, that having a disqualifying medical condition is not actually disqualifying, or that they can apply to multiple military branches in multiple states. While no one can guarantee a medical waiver, if you follow this guide, you will maximize your chances of receiving one. Above all else, never forget that if there's a will, there's a waiver! Is Your Medical History Truly History? Department of Defense Instruction 6130.03, Volume 1, Medical Standards for Military Service: Appointment, Enlistment, or Induction, is the governing document for all things related to military medical waivers. It is as long as it is complex and thus there are many misperceptions about it. Most people believe that if their medical condition is listed in that instruction, then they are not eligible to join the military. However, having a medical condition listed there simply means you must apply for a waiver. It says so right in section 1.2(d). "It is DoD [Department of Defense] policy to ... allow applicants who do not meet the physical and medical standards in this volume to be considered for a medical waiver." Equally confusingly, if during a physical at the Military Entrance Processing Station an applicant is "permanently disqualified", they are not permanently disqualified in any normal sense of the words. Rather, they are disqualified unless they can receive a waiver and, indeed, receiving a permanent disqualification is required to apply for a waiver. Some applicants might receive a "temporary disqualification," but this means that they need further documentation or testing before a Military Entrance Processing Station physician can either clear or permanently disqualify them. If everything in Department of Defense Instruction 6130.03 is theoretically waivable, what is likely to be waived? Many positions within the military make extraordinary physical demands and the military must maintain deployability of its forces. But the rule of thumb that I use to advise applicants is that you stand a chance of a medical waiver if your medical history is truly history. In other words, if you have no symptoms, take no medication, and have no risk of reinjury as a result of your medical condition, then a medical waiver may be possible for you. Once again, refer to the Department of Defense guidance. Section 1.2 attempts to ensure that servicemembers are "medically capable of performing duties without aggravating physical defects or medical conditions" (meaning no symptoms); "medically adaptable to the military environment without geographical area limitations" (meaning no prescription medication required); and "free of medical conditions or physical defects that may reasonably be expected to require excessive time lost from duty for necessary treatment or hospitalization" (meaning no risk of reinjury). My medical history — which included two 60-plus degree lumbar and thoracic spinal curves and two spinal fusion surgeries — was conducive to a medical waiver because I achieved a complete medical recovery prior to applying to the military. If your medical condition meets these criteria, a waiver might be possible for you too. Re-Reapply While applicants can only formally apply to one military branch at a time, most people do not realize that you can apply to a different branch after you've been rejected by one. In other words, keep applying. If you have been rejected by the Army, for example, you could still apply to the Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Space Force, or Coast Guard. While you may face some hesitancy from recruiters who, as a general matter, will assume your past medical rejection increases the likelihood of another rejection, you are nonetheless allowed to reapply. The reason you are able to do this is because, according to instruction 6010.03 Section 4.2, each service makes its own waiver decisions. Because the National Guard Bureau is considered its own Defense Department component, applicants have another "chance" with the Army or Air National Guard as well. Thus, you may have five to seven chances at receiving a medical waiver. Having applied to four different military branches myself, I suspect this is close to the maximum number of attempts you could handle before your patience and perseverance run out anyway. Although you can only formally apply to one military branch at a time, I always encourage applicants to "shop around" in order to keep their options open. That is to say, either before you start applying or while you are inevitably running into some waiver difficulties, you can and should be talking to recruiters from other branches. This will reduce the timeline for switching between branches, since you won't have to reach out cold to new recruiters to restart your application. Even within components, you could talk to multiple recruiters within the same geographic area. For example, an applicant living in Washington, D.C., might want to reach out to the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia Army National Guards and Air National Guards. That is six potential pathways in total and even more if you are willing to venture to other states. You might find more vacancies, different opportunities, better recruiters, or forward-leaning commanders willing to push you for a waiver. It may allow you to process through a different Military Entrance Processing Station, as well. In my own case, my recruiters recommended that I apply through the Military Entrance Processing Station in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, which had a reputation for some flexibility compared to the overburdened Boston, Massachusetts, station that rejected me years earlier. While certain units usually process with specific Military Entrance Processing Stations, you may be able to request an exception and complete a physical at an alternate location, which may improve your outcomes. Why can applicants do all this? Is it not a waste of government time and resources to let rejected applicants reapply? I do not believe so because each application is reviewed by different people for different purposes. Different branches and components have different waiver authorities as well as different manpower requirements, recruitment goals, and mission sets. In this way, military recruiting is federated, which you can use to your advantage. Be a Waiver Innovator While there is no silver bullet to receiving a medical waiver, there are a number of ways to improve your chances of getting one. First, think about where you are applying. As mentioned above, recruiter and commander buy-in are essential ingredients for receiving a medical waiver. While not the waiver authority, these points of contact can dictate how quickly you move through the process — as anyone with an unresponsive recruiter can attest — and if you are pushed for a waiver at all. In my experience, I have found reserve and National Guard units to have some of the most responsive recruiters and commanders for the simple reason that these units "keep you" if they are able to get you into uniform, as opposed to active-duty recruiters who push you through the pipeline only to send you off elsewhere for assignment. In other words, active-duty commanders and recruiters do not necessarily reap the rewards from the extra work of getting you waived whereas the reserve and National Guard do. Second, you should consider what you are bringing to the military. If you have medical, legal, or ecclesiastical degrees or certifications, you might be eligible for a "specialty career" as a military physician, judge advocate general, or chaplain. If you fall into one of these categories, you may increase your chances of receiving a medical waiver because these specialties are always in demand and sometimes leverage their own recruitment and accessions processes. Given the military's continued focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, some positions such as linguist and cyber specialist are now being treated as specialty careers with their own accessions process as well. Lastly, as with any job search, you should consider whom you know. I was only able to secure my medical waiver through the help of a colleague who happened to be a colonel in the Air National Guard as well as the state air surgeon. I have seen great contacts made through employers, especially Department of Defense civilians and contractors, as well as university alumni networks and advocacy organizations such as the Defense Entrepreneurs Forum. I strongly recommend applicants explore these paths. One common approach is to try to get members of Congress or general officers involved to assist. While I have seen this work for some exceedingly well-connected individuals, I have not seen this strategy work too often. Most applicants I advise receive little more than an official inquiry from the Hill and bureaucratic response from the Department of Defense, resulting in no tangible change to their application status. My engagement with Capitol Hill got me a phone call and a rejection letter. Thus, while I generally do not advise the congressional or general officer route, leveraging your network is an essential aspect of waiver innovation. You would be surprised by who you know and heartened by the number of people willing to help. Worth the Wait The medical waiver process is long, difficult, and not at all guaranteed. Every step in this process feels painfully slow — for example, transferring applications from the Army to the Navy took me over one month despite the offices being in the same building. If you require a medical waiver, it can take up to three months or even longer if you need to shop around across military services. For me, the entire process took three years and included three medical rejections but ultimately did result in a waiver. If you are steadfast in your commitment to serve, it can be worth the wait. Since writing my last op-ed, over 100 individuals have reached out to me asking for help regarding military medical waiver issues. I am very pleased to report that at least five of these individuals have gone on to receive a medical waiver and join the U.S. military after initial medical rejections. I have no doubt that these individuals will serve honorably and contribute greatly to the defense of our nation despite their medical histories. Systemic changes and wholesale reform are needed to fix the broken military medical waiver process. Until then, I hope this playbook helps even more of my fellow citizens fulfill their dreams of service. The U.S. military and Department of Defense will be better for it. Joe Schuman worked at the Department of Defense's National Security Innovation Network for four and a half years, including two years as National Service Portfolio director. In that capacity, he helped launched a suite of internship, fellowship, and government hiring programs, resulting in the government hiring actions of more than 50 individuals. Joe serves in uniform as a force support officer in the Air National Guard, coordinating manpower, personnel, and services within his wing and is a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He can be contacted at joeschuman1234@gmail.com. Image: Airman Sara Kolinski

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