



THIS WEEK'S FEATURE

When Your Command Rushes You Out the Door Before Your Medical Board Finishes

What DoD and Coast Guard regulations actually say about administrative separation vs. disability processing, and what to do if it's happening to you

LTC (Ret) Francesca Graham

Vice President, Walk the Talk Foundation

You reported an injury, a diagnosis, or a condition connected to your service. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, your command starts an administrative separation or a Board of Inquiry (BOI) against you, on a completely different basis, before your medical evaluation is ever resolved.

If this is happening to you, here is what you need to know: this pattern is common, the rules genuinely differ depending on your service, and there are specific things you can do right now to protect your benefits.

WHAT IS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN, ACROSS EVERY SERVICE

- If you have a medical condition that may make you unfit for duty, you are generally entitled to referral into the Disability Evaluation System (DES/IDES), under DoDI 1332.18 for DoD or the Physical Disability Evaluation System (PDES) under CIM 1850.2D for the Coast Guard.
- That process is supposed to determine whether your condition is unfitting and, if so, whether you are separated or retired with disability benefits, including disability retired pay and TRICARE, protections an ordinary administrative discharge does not carry.
- Everyone, DoD and Coast Guard, officer and enlisted, shares one specific protection: if a Physical Evaluation Board has already found you fit for duty for a given condition, your command cannot turn around and separate you anyway for unsuitability based on that same condition (10 U.S.C. § 1214a).

That last protection is narrower than it sounds. It only stops your command from relitigating a condition a board already cleared you on. It does not guarantee your medical board runs first, or even at all, and here is where the services genuinely diverge.

WHERE IT GOES WRONG: DOD (ARMY, NAVY, AIR FORCE, MARINE CORPS, SPACE FORCE)

The rule for DoD services is the same in substance for officers and enlisted members, just written in two different instructions.

- **Enlisted (DoDI 1332.14, § 3.3.a.(8)(d)):** if your command has a misconduct or performance basis to separate you, they are told not to route your case through the medical/mental-health separation category at all; they use the misconduct basis instead. That sidesteps the disability question entirely rather than triggering it.
- **Officers (DoDI 1332.30, § 9.2):** the same logic applies. A pending or diagnosed medical condition does not by itself stop a Board of Inquiry from proceeding on a misconduct or performance basis.
- **The overarching rule (DoDI 1332.18, § 11.2.a.(1)):** the requirement that unfit members be separated or retired with disability benefits explicitly "will not prevent disciplinary or other administrative separations." DoD's system does not



suspend and close your medical board the way the Coast Guard's does; it simply lets the misconduct track run its own course, which in practice can produce the same result if your ADSEP finishes first.

WHAT WE'RE SEEING IN OUR OWN CASE DATA

Of the intake cases in our system flagging a Board of Inquiry, administrative separation, or forced separation, roughly one in four also involve a documented medical dimension. This is not a rare edge case. It is a recurring pattern.

WHERE IT GOES WRONG (AND ONE REAL PROTECTION): COAST GUARD

The Coast Guard's version is more explicit than DoD's, and it cuts both ways: it names the problem directly, but it also hands you a specific tool DoD members don't have.

- **The default rule (CIM 1850.2D, Art. 2.C.11, PDF pages 45–46, printed pages 2-21 to 2-22; CI 1000.4C § 1.8 for officers, PDF pages 34–35, printed pages 1-23 to 1-24; § 2.5 for enlisted, PDF pages 54–55, printed pages 2-2 to 2-3):** if you're being processed for disability retirement or separation at the same time your command is pursuing an administrative separation or disciplinary action for misconduct, your disability evaluation is formally suspended while the misconduct case proceeds. If a punitive or administrative discharge is executed, your disability case is closed outright and simply filed in your medical record. This rule is written identically for officers and enlisted members; only the section and page numbers change.
- **The real exception (CI 1000.4C § 1.8(b) for officers, PDF page 35; § 2.5(b) for enlisted, PDF page 55; both citing 10 U.S.C. § 1177):** if your Narrative Summary (NARSUM) flags a traumatic brain injury or a behavioral health condition tied to a specific stressor event, your command is required to determine whether that condition directly or substantially contributed to the conduct at issue. If it did, your disability processing supersedes the pending administrative separation. This is a real, citable lever DoD's own rules do not spell out as clearly.
- **A separate protection tied to enlistment expiration (CI 1000.4C § 2.K.7.a.(4), PDF page 79, printed page 2-27):** if you're subject to a pending Physical Evaluation Board, the Coast Guard generally will not let you separate at the end of your enlistment until the board takes final action, unless you sign a written statement voluntarily waiving that protection. Read anything like that carefully before you sign it.

IF THIS IS HAPPENING TO YOU RIGHT NOW

- **Get it in writing** that you have a medical condition and request DES/PDES referral immediately, in writing, to your chain of command and your servicing medical treatment facility. Do not rely on a verbal request.
- **State the connection explicitly:** if your current issue may be connected to a diagnosed or undiagnosed medical or mental health condition, say so in writing, and ask for a nexus determination before your separation proceeds. Coast Guard members: if TBI or a stressor-linked behavioral health condition is anywhere in your medical record, point directly to CI 1000.4C § 1.8(b) (PDF page 35) or § 2.5(b) (PDF page 55) and 10 U.S.C. § 1177 when you make this request.
- **Request a hold:** ask that your separation action be held pending the outcome of your medical evaluation. You may not get a yes, but the request needs to be on the record either way. This matters most for DoD members, since there is no automatic suspend-and-resume the way there is for the Coast Guard.



- **Don't sign blind:** do not sign anything, including a resignation, a discharge acknowledgment, or any waiver, without understanding what it does to your medical processing. Coast Guard members nearing EAOS, this specifically includes the § 2.K.7.a.(4) waiver statement.
- **Get counsel early:** military defense counsel or a civilian attorney, ideally before your BOI or separation board convenes, not after.
- **Document everything:** dates, names, what you requested, what you were told, and by whom. If your request for referral is denied or ignored, that denial matters later.
- **If you're already separated** and believe your medical board was wrongly dropped, you may still have options through the Board for Correction of Military/Naval Records (BCMR/BCNR) or the Discharge Review Board, but the process is harder and slower once you're out.

REACH OUT NOW, NOT AFTER YOU'VE SIGNED SOMETHING

We can help you understand exactly which rules apply to your service and what to request before it's too late to matter. Start a private case review: walkthetalkfoundation.org

HOW MEMBERS OF CONGRESS CAN ACTUALLY HELP

Congress cannot order your board to stop or direct a specific outcome in your case; that would cross into the Executive Branch's territory. But congressional offices have tools that move faster than almost anything else available to you, and Congress can also fix the underlying policy gap for everyone who comes after you.

For your individual case, right now:

- **A casework/constituent inquiry letter** from your senator or representative's office is often the fastest tool available. Offices can formally ask your service to explain your case status, and agencies typically respond within 30 days.
- **A Congressional Record Statement or Letter of Inquiry** can put your case, and the pattern it reflects, on the official record even before a hearing happens.

For fixing the system:

- **Legislation and statutory reform:** members of Congress can introduce bills requiring DoD to adopt the Coast Guard's suspend-and-resume model servicewide, or extending the TBI/behavioral-health nexus requirement in 10 U.S.C. § 1177 beyond the Coast Guard to every branch.
- **Committee investigations and oversight letters:** House Armed Services and Oversight and Government Reform, and Senate Armed Services and HSGAC, can formally request data from DoD and DHS on how often medical processing is closed out by an administrative separation, and demand a policy response.
- **Appropriations riders:** Congress can condition DoD and Coast Guard funding on servicewide reforms to how administrative separation and disability processing interact.
- **GAO referrals:** committees can direct GAO to audit how often this happens across the services, turning an anecdote into documented, servicewide evidence.



If you know your representative or senator's office and want help drafting a casework request, we can help with that too. And if you're an advocacy-minded reader rather than someone currently going through this, supporting our legislative work is what makes this fix possible for the people who come after you: walkthetalkfoundation.org/donate/

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LTC (Ret) Francesca Graham is the Vice President of the Walk the Talk Foundation. All articles are posted on [LinkedIn](#) and online at walkthetalkfoundation.org. The Star Chamber podcast is available on [Apple](#), [Spotify](#), and [YouTube](#).

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