



Paralyzed Veterans  
of America

# WASHINGTON UPDATE

*Recent news regarding legislation and regulatory actions affecting veterans and people with disabilities.*

Written and produced by Paralyzed Veterans of America - Government Relations Department

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## FY 2021 BUDGET REQUEST FALLS SHORT OF VA NEEDS

The Administration is once again asking Congress to provide large increases in funding VA, but many of its projected dollar amounts fall short of *The Independent Budget's* (IB) recommendations. The President's \$4.8 trillion Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Budget Proposal to Congress, which was released on February 10, includes \$109.5 billion in discretionary funding and resources for VA health care, benefits and national cemeteries. These numbers represent an increase of \$13.5 billion or 14.1 percent above 2020. An additional \$133.8 billion was requested in mandatory funding for benefit programs; specifically: disability compensation and pension, readjustment benefits, and housing and insurance, which represents an increase of \$9 billion or 7.2 percent above 2020.

The FY 2021 Budget Proposal would provide about \$94.5 billion for VA medical care funding. This figure represents a 12.7 percent increase above the 2020 amount and includes funding to continue the integration of the expanded requirements for the VA MISSION Act of 2018. The request also includes \$1.2 billion for the expansion of VA's Caregiver program, which provides stipend payments to eligible veterans. It would also set aside \$626 million for gender-specific women's health care—\$53 million more than current year levels. The increase would fund expanded access to gynecology, provide more primary care services for women, and enable VA to continue to identify and serve the health care needs of women veterans. The Administration also seeks \$2.6 billion for VA's Electronic Health Record Modernization project and \$787 million for medical and prosthetic research in FY 2021. That latter figure is \$13 million less than currently approved levels.

Elsewhere, the President's proposed budget provides the Veterans Benefits Administration with \$3.2 billion to process 1.4 million disability compensation claims and 3.8 million education claims. Roughly \$137 million of that amount is designated to support Blue Water Navy claims processing, hiring of new claims processors to augment staffing capacity, and completing document scanning requirements not finished during 2020.

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Also, \$360 million would go toward the operation of 156 national cemeteries and enhance the National Cemetery Administration's National Shrine and Veterans Legacy programs.

Finally, the request provides \$1.8 billion in Major and Minor Construction for priority infrastructure projects, seismic corrections, and cemetery expansions. Among the proposed list of major projects are a new SCI/D Center with 30 (replacement) acute beds and 20 (new) long-term-care beds in San Diego, California, as well as a new 30 bed Long-Term Care Center with space for an additional future 30 beds in Dallas, Texas.

Unfortunately, the Administration's budget proposal includes at least two more harmful proposals. One would cut over \$6.4 billion dollars in 10 years from veterans' disability compensation payments by rounding down cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs). Another would make it harder for veterans to receive exams necessary to prove their claims in the future. PVA and its IBVSO partners are opposing both of these proposals.

On February 27, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie and the IBVSOs testified about VA's budget request before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee. To review the written testimony and view the hearing, please visit: <https://veterans.house.gov/events/hearings/full-committee-hearing-us-department-of-veterans-affairs-budget-request-for-fiscal-year-2021>. PVA will continue to work with appropriators to ensure enough funding is provided to meet the rising demand by veterans for care at VA hospitals and clinics, and to ensure the VA MISSION Act is fully and faithfully implemented.

## **U.S. ELECTION ASSISTANCE COMMISSION HOLDS FORUM ON ACCESSIBILITY AND SECURITY**

On Thursday, February 20, Senior Associate Advocacy Director Lee Page attended the U.S. Election Assistance Commission's (EAC) 2020 Elections Disability, Accessibility, and Security Forum. Voting has already started for the 2020 elections, but addressing the growing concerns regarding accessibility and security is an important, ongoing conversation. The 2020 Elections Disability, Accessibility, and Security Forum brought together state and local election officials, people with disabilities, disability advocates, and election security experts to discuss issues and advance solutions. The collaborative workshops and EAC's efforts aim to assist election officials serving voters with disabilities in the 2020 elections and beyond. All four EAC commissioners were in attendance and played a leading role in promoting collaboration between participants.

The goal of the workshops was to identify major challenges and opportunities with respect to accessibility and security in election administration. Topics for workshop discussions included the 2020 elections and voters with disabilities, ballot-marking devices, proven best practices in voting accessibility, vote-by-mail, paper ballots, emerging voting technology for people with disabilities, and polling place access.

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Disability rights advocates urged election officials to focus on accessibility alongside security for U.S. elections and pushed for more technological solutions that would allow all Americans to cast secure votes.

EAC Chairwoman Christy McCormick noted during the summit that 14.3 million Americans with disabilities voted during the 2018 midterm elections, a number she said would “certainly increase” during the upcoming 2020 presidential election. “We must ensure any technological voting solutions offer universal access and do not infringe upon a voter's privacy,” McCormick said. “People with disabilities have the right to a seamless integrated and welcoming voting process at the polls.”

Concerns around the use of technology in elections were also heightened this month following the use of a new vote tabulation app by the Iowa Democratic Party during the Iowa caucuses. The app malfunctioned due to a “coding issue,” leading to chaos around the final vote tally. After these incidents, election security experts have advocated for using more paper ballots to ensure no individual or group can hack the votes, and to ensure no glitch can occur.

Moving completely away from technological resources for voting would mean election officials may not be able to provide accessibility for disabled voters. Matt Masterson, a senior cybersecurity advisor and a former EAC commissioner, highlighted the link between accessibility to elections and the security of the vote. “I could not agree more that it's not a debate between the two, that accessibility is security,” Masterson said Thursday. “Privacy and independence are a security question as much as it is an accessibility question, if you can't vote privately and independently, it is not a secure process.”

## NEWS ITEMS OF NOTE

- American Bar Association Approves Air Travel Resolution

At the American Bar Association's (ABA's) midyear meeting, delegates approved a resolution urging Congress to amend the Air Carrier Access Act to include a private right of action. The resolution will allow the ABA to advocate for legislation currently pending in Congress, which is one of PVA's top priorities. Sponsored by the ABA's Commission on Disability Rights, the resolution passed despite opposition from the ABA's Forum on Air and Space Law. Heather Ansley, AED of Government Relations, assisted the Commission in developing information to support the resolution. Ms. Ansley also attended the midyear meeting in Austin, Texas, and spoke in support of the resolution.

- Independent Budget Released for FYs 2021 and 2022

In advance of the President's budget, DAV, PVA, and Veterans of Foreign Wars released, [The Independent Budget \(IB\) Recommendations for Fiscal Years \(FY\) 2021](#)

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[and 2022 Advance Appropriations](#), providing a roadmap to ensure that VA is fully-funded and capable of carrying out its mission to serve veterans and their families, both now and in the future. For fiscal year (FY) 2021, The IB recommended \$98.4 billion in total medical care funding to meet the full demand for care both within VA health care facilities, as well as through the new Community Care Networks established by the VA MISSION Act. The IB recommended a \$328 million increase for prosthetics and sensory aids; \$590 million to improve gender-specific health care and services for women veterans; \$20 million in reproductive services for service-connected catastrophically disabled veterans; and \$776 million to begin closing the gap in clinical vacancies across the Veterans Health Administration.

For the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), the IB recommend a total of \$3.23 billion for FY 2021—an increase of roughly \$101 million over FY 2020—and \$218 million for the Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA)—an increase of approximately \$36 million above the current fiscal year. The IB recommendations include additional information technology (IT) funding for both VBA and BVA to modernize their IT infrastructure and streamline the delivery of benefits to more than four million disabled veterans and their survivors.

- Independent Budget VSOs Release Critical Issue Report

The IB recently issued [The Independent Budget Veterans Agenda for the 116th Congress: Critical Issue Update](#). This follow-up to our 2019 report evaluates progress on 26 key recommendations concerning access to veterans health care, benefits, and transitional services, to help ensure the VA MISSION Act will be fully and faithfully implemented. Since the majority of the reforms contained in the VA MISSION Act have only been in effect since last June, and others have not yet been implemented, it is still too soon to judge whether the law will achieve its intended purpose to improve veterans' access to high-quality medical care. However, of the 26 recommendations we believe that only one has been fulfilled, 11 have not been fulfilled and 14 are considered "to be determined," which indicates partial or no fulfillment, with aspects that cannot be fully evaluated at this time. Among those recommendations that The IB rated as not fulfilled are: conducting an open, transparent process for developing market area assessments and strategic plans that actively engages veteran service organization and veteran stakeholders; the equal application of quality and competency standards across both VA and non-VA providers to ensure the highest level of care possible for veterans; and the creation of a tiered integrated network that places VA providers first, and DOD, federal partners and academic affiliates second when VA care is not accessible.

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## UPCOMING EVENTS

- On March 3 at 2:00 p.m. ET, PVA National President David Zurfluh will testify at a Joint Hearing of Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs about PVA's 2020 policy priorities. To view the hearing, please visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxCMag7ZfqE>.
- On March 3 at 10:00 a.m. ET, Lee Page, Senior Associate Advocacy Director, will testify before the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Aviation Subcommittee on the airline passenger experience: what is and what it can be. To view the hearing, please visit: <https://transportation.house.gov/committee-activity/hearings/the-airline-passenger-experience-what-it-is-and-what-it-can-be>.
- On March 3 at 10:00 a.m. ET, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight will hold a hearing on whether VA is ready to care for the aging veteran population. PVA submitted testimony for the record. To view the hearing, please visit: <https://veterans.house.gov/events/hearings/subcommittee-on-health-oversight-hearing-the-silver-tsunami-is-va-ready>.