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# Washington Update

Visit the [PVAAction Force](#) page to view our latest alerts and a list of key legislation and its status. Check out our [latest blog](#) on our women veterans' policy priorities.

## FY 2023 BUDGET SUBMISSION WOULD FUND ARRAY OF DISABILITY COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

The Administration's fiscal year (FY) 2023 budget submission proposes significant increases in funding for numerous programs affecting Americans with disabilities.

The budget requests \$37.7 billion in discretionary funding for the Department of Justice, a \$4.2 billion increase from the 2021 enacted level. Promising to reinvigorate federal civil rights enforcement, the budget offers \$367 million, an increase of \$101 million over the previous level, to support police reform, the prosecution of hate crimes, enforcement of voting rights, and efforts to provide equitable access to justice.

To protect elections and the right to vote, the budget proposes \$10 billion over ten years for the Election Assistance Commission to fund grants increasing access and security to the ballot. States would be responsible for assessing their most urgent needs and making changes under those grants. However, new voting machines are among the top priorities for those grants, which are

required to be accessible under the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Help America Vote Act.

The Federal Transit Administration would receive an \$8.2 billion increase to \$21.1 billion. The funds are targeted to efforts to strengthen the nation's transit systems, reduce emissions, and improve transportation access for people with disabilities and historically disadvantaged communities.

For the Social Security Administration (SSA), the budget provides an increase of \$1.6 billion, or 14 percent over the 2021 enacted level, to improve services at SSA's field offices, state disability determination services, and teleservice centers. The budget also seeks to improve access to SSA's services by adding staff to speed disability claims processing and reduce wait times.

The Department of Labor (DOL) would see an increase of \$397 million to \$2.2 billion. The budget increases funding for DOL's Veterans' Employment and Training Services' (VETS) Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program to \$62.5 million, enabling the program to serve over 1,000 additional veterans experiencing homelessness. The request also provides the Employment and Training

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Administration \$10 million for a new program, developed in collaboration with VETS and the VA, focused on helping veterans shift to careers in clean energy. The Office of Disability Employment Policy's request is \$58 million, which includes increased funding of \$19 million to support new initiatives that address the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic for people with disabilities. Overall, VETS would receive almost \$331 million, an increase of \$14.6 million, to enable VETS to serve more veterans experiencing homelessness; improve USERRA (Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act) enforcement capabilities, financial operations, and knowledge management; and policy and workforce coordination.

At the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the budget provides \$180 million to support 2,000 units of new permanently affordable housing specifically for the elderly and persons with disabilities. The budget also contains \$35 billion in HUD funding for state and local housing finance agencies and their partners to provide grants, revolving loan funds, and other streamlined financing tools that reduce transactional costs and increase housing supply, as well as grants to advance state and local jurisdictions' efforts to remove barriers to affordable housing development.

The budget would also provide nearly \$500 million to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Survey and Certification, an increase of 24 percent, to support health and safety inspections at nursing homes and enhance Medicare behavioral health benefits, eliminate cost sharing for vaccines, and add coverage of services from community health workers.

Finally, the budget includes a \$48 million initiative to build a more equitable National Park System. Through this initiative, the Department of the Interior would expand operations at parks that preserve and tell the story of historically underrepresented and marginalized groups, further integrate tribal viewpoints into park management, address transportation barriers to parks from underserved communities, and improve park accessibility for visitors and employees with disabilities.

## DOT PUBLISHES PROPOSED RULE ON ACCESS TO LAVATORIES ON LARGER SINGLE-AISLE AIRCRAFT

After years of delays, the Department of Transportation (DOT) recently published a [notice of proposed rulemaking](#) that would eventually require an accessible lavatory on larger single-aisle aircraft. The language of the proposed rule stems from a 2016 negotiated rulemaking in which PVA and other stakeholders came to agreement that would give a date certain for accessible lavatories but still requires a lengthy timeline for full implementation.

In light of delays in publishing the rule and equity concerns, DOT is seeking comments not only on the rule but also whether the proposed timeline should be shortened or accessibility requirements lessened to provide more access sooner. In a [DOT news release](#) about the proposed rule, PVA National President Charlie Brown said, "We cannot underscore the importance of having dignified access to lavatories for our physical health and well-being, and we must have lavatory access as soon as possible."

PVA will be providing comments on the rule which are due May 27. We also encourage PVA members to [submit individual comments](#) about the importance of having lavatory access on single-aisle aircraft as soon as possible.

## VA CONTINUES IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW ELECTRONIC HEALTH RECORD

On March 26, the VA [launched](#) its new electronic health record (EHR) system at the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center in Walla Walla, Washington. The recent launch brings all VA clinics in the Walla Walla catchment area online with the new EHR system, including facilities in the following locations:

- Washington – Richland and Yakima
- Oregon – Boardman, Enterprise, and La Grande
- Idaho – Lewiston

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The next rollout of the new EHR system is scheduled for April 30 at the VA Central Ohio Healthcare System in Columbus, Ohio.

### **PVA TAKES PART IN BRIEFING ON EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS LEGISLATION**

PVA's National Advocacy Director Susan Prokop took part in a March 22 congressional briefing on the READI for Disasters Act (H.R. 4938/S. 2658) and Disaster Relief Medicaid Act (DRMA) (H.R. 4937/S. 2646), two measures designed to improve attention to the concerns of people with disabilities in emergency preparedness, response, and recovery.

Hosted by the Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies, the online event featured remarks from several disability organization advocates; representatives for Rep. Jimmy Panetta (D-CA), the main sponsor of DRMA, and Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA), the chief sponsor of both bills in the Senate; Amy Nicholas, Senior Attorney Advisor with the National Council on Disability; and Rep. James Langevin, (D-RI) chief sponsor of READI.

In her comments, Susan addressed PVA's support for the two measures citing PVA members' difficulties in natural disasters dating back to Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Information about READI and DRMA can be found at [www.READI.com](http://www.READI.com). The March 22 event can be found on [YouTube](#).

### **HOUSE COMMITTEE APPROVES VETERANS LEGISLATION**

The House Veterans' Affairs Committee recently approved 17 veterans-related bills, setting the stage for consideration by the full chamber soon. The bills approved included H.R. 7158, the Long-Term Care Veterans Choice Act, which would authorize the VA to enter into contracts to place certain disabled veterans in medical foster homes at the request of such veterans, and H.R. 7153, the VA Principles of Benefits Automation Act, which requires the department to submit a plan on modernizing the information technology systems for the Veterans

Benefits Administration. You can find a complete list of the bills considered [here](#) and a video of the markup session [here](#).

### **SVAC EXAMINES WAYS TO INCREASE DENTAL CARE FOR VETERANS**

The Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) held a roundtable on April 6 to discuss VA's dental benefit. Even though dental benefits are the bridge to health and wellness, the VA closely rationes these services citing the severe underfunding of its dental departments. The VA provides dental care services to a small fraction of veterans enrolled in the VA health care system, including veterans with a 100 percent service-connected disability, veterans with service-connected dental conditions, former prisoners of war, and homeless veterans.

According to the VA, only six percent of the almost nine million VA enrollees receive VA dental care. At the roundtable, Senators engaged Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Dentistry Patricia Arola and veterans service organizations on various topics, such as expanding the VA's capacity to provide in-house dental care to more veterans, expanding rural veterans' access to dental services, and increasing research on veterans' dental health programs. PVA has supported legislation in the past which would require the VA to furnish dental care in the same manner as any other medical service. The prevailing hope is this recent conversation about needed dental care will spur some form of legislative action on the matter in the future.

### **HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE EXAMINES VA'S FY23 BUDGET PROPOSAL**

On April 6, the House Appropriations Committee's Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs held a hearing to examine the Administration's fiscal year (FY) 2023 budget request for the VA. As previously reported, the President requested a total of \$301.4 billion for the VA which is roughly 10.6 percent more than current year levels. \$139.1 billion of that amount would go towards health care delivery and the remaining \$161.3 billion would be provided for education programs, disability compensation for veterans, and survivor benefits.

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Several of the Subcommittee’s members expressed concern with the rising cost of delivering health care for veterans during the hearing. VA Secretary Denis McDonough, the department’s lone witness, explained that rising costs are a function of both health care inflation and of increased reliance by veterans on the VA for their care. He told lawmakers that increased focus on preventative services and retention of providers should help bring the growth rate down over time. Questions were also raised about a White House proposal to separate funding for veterans’ medical care from the rest of the federal budget.

Such a change would free the veterans’ health budget from caps on nondefense spending and allow more money to go toward other nondefense areas, such as education, transportation, and homeland security. Secretary McDonough said the move would underscore the importance of investing in veterans’ health and its funding does not come at not come at the expense of other investments in the federal government that the VA also relies on for veterans’ health.

Also, it would make the government’s investment in veterans’ health look more like other areas of mandatory spending and may lead to greater trust from the veteran population. The proposal has been met with mixed reviews and it is too soon to say if legislation will be proposed regarding the matter. The VA’s recent AIR Commission recommendations, the Veterans Crisis Line, and ongoing Electronic Health Record Modernization project were also discussed during the fully [virtual hearing](#).

### **VA RELEASES VOTING SURVEY FOR VETERANS**

In March 2021, the Administration issued [Executive Order 14019: Promoting Access to Voting](#), directing federal agencies to take steps to make voting registration more accessible. The Executive Order directed agencies to expand opportunities for eligible citizens to register to vote, obtain information about elections, and participate in the election process. In response, the VA is assisting veterans by [posting registration information](#) on their website and linking veterans to online [voter registration](#). In addition, the VA is piloting a program

in six states to seek designation as [voter registration agencies](#), allowing people to register to vote at VA facilities.

The VA recently released a national survey seeking input from veterans and their family members on how the VA can best assist veterans in voting. The survey also addresses challenges experienced during the voting process. PVA encourages veterans and their families to participate in the [short online survey](#) and provide their feedback before the April 22 deadline.

## **NEWS OF NOTE**

### **VA Announces PAWS Act Pilot Program**

On March 30, the VA published a Federal Register notice [announcing](#) its plan for implementing the pilot program required by the Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers for Veterans Therapy Act. The pilot will help the VA explore the benefits of service dog training and provide the VA with data needed to make recommendations to Congress on the way forward.

Veterans participating in the program will have the opportunity to train potential future service dogs with the goal of helping veterans manage their PTSD symptoms.

The pilot program will be offered at the following five VA medical centers:

- Anchorage, Alaska
- Asheville, North Carolina
- Palo Alto, California
- San Antonio, Texas
- West Palm Beach, Florida

### **VA’s Women Veterans Website Refreshed**

Women veterans now have a newly refreshed VA website for their health care needs. Each page details health concerns specific to veterans and gives clear guidance on how to access care and services at the VA. Click [here](#) to read more.



## Access Your Financial Status Reports Online

The VA has enhanced its debt portal by adding a new user-friendly online financial status report form for Veterans Benefits Administration debts. In addition to the [online debt management tool](#) launched in 2021, this feature makes it easier to [manage benefit-related debt online](#).

## Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program Seeks Veterans

Congress created the Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP) to assist unemployed veterans who have lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. VRRAP provides up to 12 months of tuition and fees and a monthly housing allowance to eligible veterans training towards employment in a [high-demand occupation](#). Visit the [VA VRRAP website](#) for more information about the program including how to apply.

## Advanced Care Planning A Conversation about Burial Benefit

The VA invites caregivers and veterans to join the Washington DC VA Cooperative Studies Program team, American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), and the VA National Cemetery Administration (NCA) for the second event in their Advanced Care Planning Series. Participants will learn more about the services and benefits offered through VA NCA. The event will be held on April 20 from 10:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m. ET. There will be an opportunity to ask questions to the presenters. Please RSVP at least 72 hours in advance by clicking [here](#).

## EVENTS AND HEARINGS

### Upcoming VA Committee Activities

Please visit the House Veterans' Affairs Committee [webpage](#) and the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee [webpage](#) for information on upcoming hearings and markups.

## Reminder: DOT Accepting Comments on Air Travel Experience of Passengers with Disabilities

On March 24, the Department of Transportation (DOT) held a [public meeting](#) on the air travel experience of wheelchair users. The meeting focused on wheelchair damage and the experience of wheelchair users in using the aisle chair. DOT is accepting public comments on the barriers wheelchair users encounter in air travel until April 25. To submit comments, please click [here](#).

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