



Washington Update

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Administration's FY 2024 VA Budget Proposal Released

On March 9, the Administration released its budget request for fiscal year (FY) 2024. The Administration's FY 2024 budget request for VA is \$325.1 billion, a \$16.6 billion increase above the FY 2023 budget enacted levels. The figure includes \$142.8 billion in discretionary spending and \$182.3 billion in mandatory spending. The President's budget seeks \$20.3 billion in FY 2024 for the Cost of War Toxic Exposures Fund which is \$15.3 billion more than FY 23 for health care, research, and benefits delivery associated with exposure to environmental hazards for veterans and their survivors. Also, \$16.6 billion would be allocated in FY 2024 for mental health efforts, including suicide prevention and another \$3.1 billion would go toward providing homeless veterans or those at-risk of homelessness with permanent housing, health care, and other supportive services.

The number of women veterans using VA services tripled over the last 20 years — growing from 160,000 in 2002 to more than 627,000. The Administration requested \$257 million for women's health and childcare programs to increase access to infertility counseling and assisted reproductive technology, eliminate copayments for contraceptive coverage, and support full-time women veteran program managers at all 172 VA medical centers. These investments support providing comprehensive specialty medical and surgical

services for women veterans, including \$1.0 billion for women's gender-specific care.

Finally, the median VA hospital is nearly 60 years old compared to 13 years in the private sector. The Administration requested \$4.1 billion of discretionary and mandatory funding to begin restoring VA's aging infrastructure. Another \$5 billion in discretionary funding is being sought for non-recurring maintenance to improve medical facility infrastructure.

You can learn more about the Administration's proposal for the VA [here](#). The Independent Budget's statement on the President's budget is [here](#).

ADMINISTRATION'S FY 2024 REQUEST OFFERS SUPPORT FOR SEVERAL PROGRAMS IMPORTANT TO AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES

The Administration's Fiscal Year 2024 budget offers a number of proposals for programs important to people with disabilities.

The proposal promises to oppose efforts to cut Social Security benefits and indicates plans to shore up the system by "ensuring high-income individuals pay their fair share," which likely refers to its longstanding position that those making above \$400,000 a year in earnings should make payroll premium contributions.



The Administration also states its intent to make improvements in the Supplemental Security Income program that supports low-income older Americans and people with disabilities.

The budget offers an increase of \$1.4 billion for the Social Security Administration (SSA) to invest in staff, information technology, and other improvements. This represents a 10 percent increase from the 2023 enacted level and would direct funds to improve customer service at SSA's field offices, state disability determination services, and teleservice centers for retirees, individuals with disabilities, and their families. The proposal also adds staff to process more disability claims and reduce the amount of time claimants have to wait for decisions on their benefits.

The budget would provide \$150 billion over 10 years to improve and expand Medicaid home and community-based services, such as personal care services, which would enable older Americans and individuals with disabilities to remain in their homes and stay active in their communities. The Administration also expects the funds to go to improvements in the quality of jobs for home care workers and to support family caregivers. Twenty million dollars would be provided to ensure military-connected children with disabilities and other highly mobile children with disabilities maintain services when they change school districts. This has been a longstanding objective of many military family advocates.

In addition, the budget provides \$258 million to support 2,200 units of new permanently affordable housing specifically for the elderly and persons with disabilities. It also includes \$32 million for a new National Park System initiative to address transportation barriers between parks and underserved communities and improve park accessibility for visitors and employees with disabilities.

NOVA LEGISLATIVE SEMINAR

National Legislative Director Morgan Brown and Senior Health Policy Advisor Roscoe Butler participated in the Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs' (NOVA)

Legislative Seminar on March 10 in Washington D.C. This year's event brought together representatives from two dozen like-minded organizations from around the country, plus Veterans Health Administration and congressional staff to discuss fixing VA's clinical staffing shortages, addressing human resource vacancies, ending on-boarding delays, and reviewing salaries so the department can remain competitive with the private sector to continue to provide the highest level of care for veterans.

PVA briefed attendees on our top health care priorities: protecting access to VA's specialized health care services and expanding access to VA long-term services and supports. In addition to PVA, several other organizations also spoke of the urgent need to expand VA's home and community-based services. Particularly noticeable about this year's event was a high level of unity among participants that Congress must do more to help VA fill critical staffing vacancies like those at VA's SCI/D centers, and invest more in VA infrastructure for buildings like long-term care centers.

VA RECOGNIZED FOR EXPANDING ACCESS TO VOTING INFORMATION AND REGISTRATION

A report, [Strengthening Democracy: A Progress Report on Federal Agency Action to Promote Access to Voting](#), reviewed federal agencies' progress in meeting the goal to expand citizens' opportunities to participate in the electoral process. On March 7, 2021, the Administration issued an [Executive Order \(EO\) 14019 on Promoting Access to Voting](#). The EO directed federal agencies to consider ways to expand opportunities for citizens to register to vote, obtain information, and participate in the electoral process.

VA [committed](#) to conducting a veterans survey, assisting homeless veterans with voter registration, developing a website with nonpartisan information about voter registration and elections, and working on a pilot program for VA health facilities to be designated as voter registration sites in Kentucky, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. The report found VA to be one of only three federal agencies that are right on track to meet its goals. Overall, the report found VA met its benchmark

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commitment, had timely progress on implementation of its goals, and engaged in other effective activities. However, it concluded that VA has yet to achieve its full potential. To further its progress, the report recommended VA continue to work closely with these states, and additional states, to designate VA facilities as voter registration sites.

HVAC HOLDS HEARING ON VISTA

On March 9, the House Veterans' Affairs Technology Modernization Subcommittee conducted a [hearing](#) on the Veterans Health Information System commonly referred to as VistA. The purpose of the hearing was for the VA to explain their long-term plan for maintaining VistA while they continue to work on developing a modernized electronic health record (EHR). VA explained that until the new EHR solution is implemented across the Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) enterprise, VistA will remain VA's authoritative source of veteran data. Sustaining VistA for the duration of VHA's EHRM effort will ensure that veterans continue receiving uninterrupted care and services while VA looks to the future.

HELPING HEROES ACT REINTRODUCED

Senators Patty Murray (D-WA) and John Boozman (R-AR), senior members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, reintroduced the Helping Heroes Act of 2023, S. 622. This legislation would support the families of disabled veterans, including children who take on caregiving roles. The Helping Heroes Act is intended to address the unmet needs of veteran caregivers, including children by:

- Requiring a full-time family coordinator at each VA medical center to assess the needs of veteran families in their catchment area and refer them to available local, state, and federal resources;
- Establishing a Family Support Program to provide supportive services to eligible family members of disabled veterans;

- Ensuring transition assistance curriculum includes information on services for children in veteran families adjusting from active duty to veteran status; and
- Requiring VA to collect data on the experiences of disabled veteran families to better identify and understand their needs.

NEWS OF NOTE

VA Women's Health Reengagement Training

VA Women's Health Reengagement Training (heaRT) discusses how to apply for and use VA health care to educate women veterans on the care they earned and deserve. Click [here](#) for seven things you need to know about the training.

Women's History Month

Throughout the month of March, VA will be celebrating 100 years of advancing health care for women veterans. From the American Revolution to the present, women have served. Learn more about their contributions and VA efforts to care for the increasing number of women veterans in this [article](#). See also:

- [Women Veterans](#)
- [Women Veterans Health Care](#)
- [Women Veterans Health Care History](#)

VA Relaxes Masking Requirements

Recently, [VA relaxed its masking requirements](#) at VA medical facilities. VA will base its future masking guidelines on the [VA COVID-19 Health Protection Levels](#) (low, medium, and high) and health care facilities' conditions. When health protection levels are high, masking will be required. However, when health protection levels are low or medium, medical center leadership will conduct a facility risk assessment to determine if it is appropriate for masking to be optional in certain areas at their facility. Regardless of health protection level or health care facility conditions, masking will still be required in high-risk areas such as chemotherapy units, acute inpatient medical/surgical



units, intensive care units, post-transplant units, dialysis units, etc. Masking will also be required at all times for individuals with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 or other viral respiratory infections.

HEARINGS, WEBINARS, AND TRAINING

President Brown Testifies on PVA's Priorities

PVA's National President Charles Brown [testified](#) before a joint session of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees on March 1. President Brown's oral statement focused on protecting access to VA's specialized health care services and expanding access to VA long-term care.

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

SSA Disability Benefits and Work Incentives Webinar

The National Disability Institute's American Dream Employment Network will host a webinar on work incentives for Social Security beneficiaries on March 23 from 3:00-4:00 p.m. ET. This webinar is for those on Social Security Disability Insurance or Supplemental Security Income who would like to learn how working will affect their benefits and steps they might take to increase their economic security.

[Registration is required](#) but there is no cost to attend. Once registered, attendees will receive an email with the link to the webinar. Live, virtual ASL interpreters and closed-captioning will be provided during this event. Questions about this webinar can be directed by email: info@AmericanDreamEN.org.

Accessible Parking and Passenger Loading Zones Webinar Available in Access Board Archives

If you missed the Access Board's webinar on accessible parking and passenger loading zones in the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Architectural Barriers Act Accessibility Standards, you can [access the webinar recording and presentation materials in the archives](#).

This webinar addressed accessibility requirements for parking spaces, van spaces, vertical clearances, access aisles, marking and signage, ground clearances, and valet parking, as well as accessible passenger loading zones. Access Board Accessibility Specialists also reviewed recommendations for the design and construction of accessible electric vehicle (EV) charging stations located on both government and private entities.

Online Help Available for Veterans Experiencing Moral Injury

When veterans keep feelings of moral distress inside and leave them unprocessed, it can lead to moral injury, which can be as damaging and life-threatening as physical injuries. Volunteers of America is offering veterans free access to an online program that allows them to share their stories of moral injury and to connect with and support other veterans. Click [here](#) to learn more.