



2026 Critical Policy Goals

119th Congress, 2nd Session

- 1. Make the claims and appeals process work better for veterans.** Due to the complex and confusing nature of the Department of Veterans Affairs claims and appeals process, veterans advocates have long pushed for regulatory and legislative reforms to simplify the process. While many changes have enhanced the VA's internal efficiencies, too many veterans continue to face significant barriers when seeking the benefits they have earned. Veterans deserve a claims and appeals system that is simple, efficient and worthy of their service—not one that burdens them with unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles. The VA should allow veterans to file claims by phone, eliminate penalties for using incorrect forms, improve decision notification letters and reform the disability examination process.
- 2. Strengthen presumptive policies to ensure toxic-exposed veterans receive earned benefits in a timely manner.** Military service members have faced toxic exposures for over a century. The Honoring our PACT Act of 2022 expanded health care and benefits for millions of affected veterans, establishing presumptions for dozens of diseases and related conditions. However, it lacks timely accountability measures and doesn't cover all current or future exposures. Our report, "Ending the Wait for Toxic-Exposed Veterans," found that it takes an average of 34.1 years for the VA to acknowledge toxic exposures and grant presumptive benefits. The VA must establish a new presumptive process that ensures more timely decisions for these veterans' claims.
- 3. Eliminate gaps in veterans mental health care and suicide prevention.** The rate of suicide among veterans continues to exceed that of the general American population, reflecting persistent shortcomings in mental health care access, coordination and effectiveness. Despite sustained investments by the Department of Veterans Affairs, existing approaches have not sufficiently reduced suicide risk, particularly for historically underserved populations such as women veterans. DAV's 2024 report, Women Veterans: The Journey to Mental Wellness, highlights gaps in existing programs and provides over 50 recommendations to improve care and reduce the rising suicide rates among veterans.
- 4. Prevent Congress or the VA from reducing, offsetting or taxing veterans benefits.** Over 5.6 million disabled veterans receive compensation for service-related conditions, but those with medical retirement benefits can't receive both military retirement pay and VA disability compensation. Veterans retiring based on length of service who are rated 40% or less disabled also face this prohibition. Veterans must also repay special separation pay when receiving VA disability compensation. It's time to end these unjust offsets and prevent any reduction or taxation of veterans benefits.
- 5. Modernize and strengthen benefits for survivors.** The VA Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) program provides tax-free monthly benefits to survivors of service members who died in the line of duty or from service-related conditions. In 2026, the DIC benefit for a surviving spouse is \$1,699 per month—about 41% of the VA disability compensation that a 100% service-connected veteran receives—which is significantly lower than the 55% survivor benefits for federal civil

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service retirees. Survivors of veterans totally disabled for less than 10 years receive no DIC, and those who remarry before age 55 lose their benefits. It's time to reform these critical survivor benefits.

6. Expand comprehensive dental care services to all service-disabled veterans.

The VA generally only provides full dental care to 100% service-disabled veterans and veterans with service-connected dental disabilities. Poor dental health can lead to a number of chronic health conditions, some of which can pose an increased risk for serious infections or chronic illnesses. The VA health care model is specifically designed to be a comprehensive, integrated and preventive system that treats the whole health of veterans, which should include dental care. Congress should close the gap by adding dental care coverage for all disabled veterans.

7. Enhance long-term care by providing assisted-living care and increasing caregiver support.

The VA offers various long-term care programs for aging veterans, but there are still some gaps, including for those who can't self-sustain at home but don't need full nursing home support. Caregivers save taxpayers significantly and provide maximum quality of life for people who, as a result of their service-connected disabilities, would otherwise require costly alternatives at taxpayer expense. Assisted-living care offers help with meals, housekeeping and other activities of daily living, which could fill this gap and provide an alternative to nursing home care. Caregivers also help veterans remain at home longer. Congress should require the VA to provide assisted living care options for disabled veterans and explore new ways to integrate caregiver support with home and community based services.

8. Sustain the VA health care system by reforming infrastructure planning and funding mechanisms.

The VA operates the largest integrated health care system in the U.S., with over 1,750 access points and 5,600 buildings; however, many facilities are over 50 years old. Failure to provide sufficient funding for modernizing, realigning and expanding VA infrastructure and constructing new VA facilities unnecessarily forces some veterans into community care and also threatens the long-term viability of the VA health care system. Congress must address the VA's aging infrastructure by reforming and fully funding facility modernization efforts.

9. Protect veterans benefits and services by ending PAYGO offsets and budget caps that cut funding.

Congress has adopted budget rules like PAYGO to limit spending which makes it difficult to expand veterans benefits without reducing other existing VA programs and benefits. The Statutory Pay-As-You-Go Act also limits new federal spending and multiyear budget caps arbitrarily constrain overall VA spending. Congress should exempt veterans programs from all PAYGO rules and budget caps to ensure adequate funding for critical benefits and services. These types of budget gimmicks essentially force veterans to "pay for" their own benefit increases rather than all Americans. Ending PAYGO would help ensure that our entire nation contributes to the cost of caring for veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors.



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