

Prologue

As the United States absorbs the aftereffects of more than a decade of continuous war, and in the face of the planned draw-down of military personnel, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will be stressed to continue to meet the growing health-care needs of the nation's veterans. Even with the lessening of hostilities and eventual withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq, Afghanistan, and other hostile assignments, the most recent cohort of veterans will grow for the foreseeable future, pressing VA for services. Long after our uniformed personnel repatriate from their deployments, their long-term wounds, whether physical or psychological, will need to be attended to by VA. This is a responsibility that cannot and should not be minimized.

Thanks to swift triage and aeromedical evacuations, and improvements in battlefield trauma medicine and surgical procedures, more combat-wounded personnel than ever before are surviving military action, and their injuries are in need of highly specialized, lifelong care, sophisticated prosthetics, and other vital equipment and services. Providing for these veterans, who voluntarily sacrificed themselves for the greater good of the nation, is a firm and lasting commitment, not only by VA but by all Americans, to restore their lives and return them to a state of optimal health.

The Independent Budget is a comprehensive budget and policy document created by veterans for veterans for VA. This budget is dedicated to veterans of all branches of military service, who have confronted our nation's enemies on behalf of those who could not, or would not, serve. *The Independent Budget* veterans service organizations (IBVSOs)—AMVETS (American Veterans), Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Paralyzed Veterans of America (Paralyzed Veterans), and Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW)—are proud to offer *The Independent Budget for Fiscal Year 2014* to review the critical issues associated with that important submission, to be released concurrent to the Administration's budget for FY 2014.

The four co-authors believe our mandate has remained steadfast over the years to ensure that VA provides:

- competent, compassionate, and consistently high-quality health care to all eligible veterans, and to their eligible families and survivors;
- timely and accurate delivery of all earned benefits to veterans, dependents, and survivors, including disability compensation, pensions, education, housing assistance, and other necessary supports; and
- dignified memorial services to all eligible veterans, preserving our national cemeteries as shrines to those lost in or following service to the nation.

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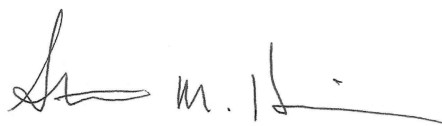
The Independent Budget is intended to be a reference and an instrument to inform and educate not only VA and its veteran stakeholders, but the general public, the Administration, and Congress, about the most pressing issues affecting VA health care, benefits, and their timely and accurate delivery, as well as a variety of memorial services. These issues make up some of the greatest concerns facing VA and the veteran community, and our detailed recommendations for improvements are provided in an effort to assist veterans in gaining and keeping access to services and benefits from a delivery system created solely for them.

The IBVSOs submit this document in the hope that legislators and VA policymakers will consider and incorporate our recommendations in developing legislation and making policy changes affecting VA for FY 2014 and beyond and for developing advance appropriations in VA health care for FY 2015. We believe that by capitalizing on the strong foundation this document provides VA will be better able to improve its benefits and services and achieve operational excellence.

As our nation's economy continues to be plagued by numerous fiscal and economic challenges of grave concern, especially in light of the failure last year of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, the IBVSOs are justifiably apprehensive about the looming threat of sequestration and its effects on VA and the veterans it serves. We strongly believe that whatever happens in the upcoming year regarding the disposition of the sequestration mandate that the veterans and families VA serves should not be forced to sacrifice any of the benefits they so clearly earned.

The IBVSOs will not support any backsliding on the outlay of funds needed for investment in essential VA programs and infrastructure, so as to retain the valuable and expensive progress made in these areas over the past several years. If the nation expects to continue to attract and retain willing and talented candidates to serve in the military, we must commit to providing the earned benefits and health-care services to those men and women who have made selfless sacrifices for the nation. We must emphasize that freedom is expensive not only to achieve, but to sustain, and this cost is often life altering and may be life ending.

Our veterans have always stepped forward when we needed them to do the tough jobs, often in the worst conditions imaginable, and while making numerous personal sacrifices and enduring physical and emotional pain. Veterans have paid their dues in full. We should ask nothing further of them. Veterans do not need or want handouts, but many need a hand up, and all deserve what they were promised and earned through their military service to America.



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The four coauthoring organizations have worked in collaboration for 27 years on *The Independent Budget* to honor veterans and their service to our country. Throughout the year, each organization works independently to identify and address legislative and policy issues that affect the organizations' memberships and the broader veterans community.

AMVETS

Since 1944, AMVETS has been preserving the freedoms secured by America's armed forces, and providing support for veterans and the active military in procuring their earned entitlements, as well as community service and legislative reform that enhances the quality of life for this nation's citizens and veterans alike. AMVETS is one of the largest Congressionally chartered veterans service organizations in the United States, and includes members from each branch of the military, including the National Guard and Reserves.

DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS

The Disabled American Veterans (DAV), founded in 1920 and chartered by Congress in 1932, is dedicated to a single purpose—empowering veterans to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity. This mission is carried forward by ensuring that veterans and their families can access the full range of benefits available to them; fighting for the interests of America's injured heroes on Capitol Hill; and educating the public about the great sacrifices and needs of veterans transitioning back to civilian life. DAV members also provide voluntary services in communities across the country.

PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

Paralyzed Veterans of America (Paralyzed Veterans), founded in 1946, is the only Congressionally chartered veterans service organization dedicated solely to serving the needs of veterans with spinal cord injury or dysfunction (SCI/D). Paralyzed Veterans' mission is to maximize the quality of life for its members and all people with disabilities. Paralyzed Veterans is a leading advocate for health care, SCI/D research and education, veterans' benefits, sports and recreational rehabilitation opportunities, accessibility and the removal of architectural barriers, and disability rights. Paralyzed Veterans is composed of 34 chapters that work to create an America where all veterans and people with

disabilities, and their families, can achieve their independence and thrive. Paralyzed Veterans represents more than 19,000 veterans in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE U.S.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. (VFW), founded in 1899 and chartered by Congress in 1936, is the nation's largest organization of combat veterans and its oldest major veterans service organization. Its 1.5 million members include veterans of past wars and conflicts, as well as those who currently serve in the active, Guard, and Reserve forces. Located in 7,900 VFW Posts worldwide, the VFW and the 600,000 members of its Auxiliaries are dedicated to "honoring the dead by helping the living." They accomplish this mission by advocating for veterans, service members, and their families on Capitol Hill as well as state governments; through local community and national military service programs; and by operating a nationwide network of service officers who help veterans recoup more than \$1 billion annually in earned compensation and pension.

Individually, each of the coauthoring organizations serves the veterans community in a distinct way. However, the four organizations work in partnership to present this annual budget request to Congress with policy recommendations regarding veterans' benefits and health care, as well as funding forecasts for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Supporters

Air Force Association
American Ex-Prisoners of War
America Federation of Government Employees
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
American Foundation for the Blind
American Military Retirees Association
American Military Society
American Psychological Association
American Psychiatric Association
American Society of Nephrology
American Thoracic Society
American Tinnitus Association
American Veteran Alliance
American Veterans for Equal Rights
Armed Forces Top Enlisted Association
Association of American Medical Colleges
Association of the United States Navy
Blinded Veterans Association
Catholic War Veterans, USA, Inc.
Combined KORUS Veterans Association
Easter Seals
Fleet Reserve Association
Gold Star Wives of America, Inc.
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
Jewish War Veterans of the USA
Korea Veterans of America, Inc.
Louisiana Veterans Coalition
Lung Cancer Alliance
Mental Health America
Military Officers Association of America

(Continued)

Military Order of the Purple Heart
Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Association for Uniformed Services
National Association of American Veterans, Inc.
National Association of State Veterans Homes
National Association of Veterans' Research and Education Foundations
National Coalition for Homeless Veterans
National Gulf War Resource Center
National Society of Cuban American Veterans
Navy Seabee Veterans of America, Inc.
New Mexico Department of Veterans' Services
Non Commissioned Officers Association of the USA
Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs
Society of Hispanic Veterans
Society of Military Spouses
United Spinal Association
United States Coast Guard Chief Petty Officers Association
US Federation of Korea Veterans Organizations
VetsFirst, A Program of United Spinal Association
VET-Force
Veterans Affairs Physician Assistant Association, Inc.
Vietnam Veterans of America
Wyoming Veterans Commission

Guiding Principles

- ❖ Veterans must not have to wait for benefits to which they are entitled.
- ❖ Veterans must be ensured access to high-quality medical care.
- ❖ Veterans must be guaranteed timely access to the full continuum of health-care services, including long-term care.
- ❖ Veterans must be assured burial in state or national cemeteries in every state.
- ❖ Specialized care must remain the focus of the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- ❖ VA's mission to support the military medical system in time of war or national emergency is essential to the nation's security.
- ❖ VA's mission to conduct medical and prosthetic research in areas of veterans' special needs is critical to the integrity of the veterans' health-care system and to the advancement of American medicine.
- ❖ VA's mission to support health professional education is vital to the health of all Americans.

Acknowledgments

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Special Thanks to:

Kelly Saxton, PVA, for editorial management
Bill Gordon, PVA, for the cover design
Lisa Bogle, DAV, for editorial assistance

Table of Contents

Prologue	i
<i>Independent Budget Authors</i>	iii
Supporters	v
Guiding Principles	vii
Acknowledgments.....	ix
Introduction	1
Benefit Programs	5
Ensure Sufficient Staffing for the Veterans Benefits Administration and the Board of Veterans' Appeals.....	7
The Veterans Benefits Administration Must Complete the Transformation and Modernization of the Veterans Benefits Claims-Processing System This Year	9
Updating and Revising the Rating Schedule.....	16
Compensation for Quality of Life and Noneconomic Loss	18
Standard for Service Connection	20
Relaxed Evidentiary Standards for Proving Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome and Military Sexual Trauma Claims.....	21
Concurrent Receipt of Compensation and Military Longevity Retired Pay	23
Annual Cost-of-Living Adjustment	24
More Equitable Rules for Service Connection of Hearing Loss and Tinnitus	25
Compensable Disability Rating for Hearing Loss Necessitating a Hearing Aid.....	26
Agent Orange in Korea	26
Supplemental Grant for Adaptation of a New Home.....	27
Administration of the Specially Adapted Housing Grant Should be Expedited for Eligible, Terminally Ill Veterans.....	28
Supplemental Entitlement to an Auto Grant for Eligible Veterans	29
Value of Policies Excluded from Consideration as Income or Assets	30
Lower Premium Schedule for Service-Disabled Veterans' Insurance	30
Pension for Nonservice-Connected Disability	31

<i>Survivor Benefits</i>	32
Increase of Dependency and Indemnity Compensation for Surviving Spouses of Service Members	32
Repeal of Offset Against the Survivor Benefit Plan	33
Retention of Remarried Survivors' Benefits at Age 55	34
Notes	34
Judicial Review	35
Enforce the Benefit-of-the-Doubt Rule	36
The Court's Backlog	37
Courthouse and Adjunct Offices	38
Notes	38
Medical Care	39
<i>Finance Issues</i>	40
Sufficient, Timely, and Predictable Funding for VA Health Care	40
Inappropriate Billing	44
Homeland Security/Funding for the Fourth Mission	47
<i>Mental Health Issues</i>	49
Mental Health Services	49
Military Sexual Trauma	65
<i>Transitioning War Veterans of All Eras to Civilian Life</i>	70
The Continuing Challenge of Caring for War Veterans and Aiding Them in Their Transitions to Civilian Life:	70
<i>Access Issues</i>	83
Timely Access to VA Health Care	83
Community-Based Outpatient Clinics	85
Veterans Rural Health Care	87
Implementation of Waiver of Health-Care Copayments For Catastrophically Disabled Veterans	97
Non-VA Emergency Services	98
<i>Specialized Services</i>	99
Prosthetics and Sensory Aids	99
Timely Delivery of Prosthetic Devices	100
Consistent Administration of the Prosthetics Program	102
Ensuring Quality and Accuracy of Prosthetics Prescriptions	102
Developing Future Prosthetics Staff	104
Prosthetics and Sensory Aids and Research	105
Hearing Loss and Tinnitus	105
The Department of Veterans Affairs Blind Rehabilitation Service	109
Spinal Cord Injury/Dysfunction Care	111
Access to Primary and Specialty Care at the Spinal Cord Injury/Disorder Center	114
Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis	116

Improving VA’s National System of Care for Multiple Sclerosis	117
Persian Gulf War Veterans	118
Women Veterans’ Health and Health-Care Programs	122
Ending Veterans Homelessness	132
<i>Long-Term Care</i>	142
Long-Term Services and Supports	142
<i>Medical And Prosthetic Research</i>	147
Funding for VA Medical and Prosthetic Research	147
<i>Administrative Issues</i>	153
The Department of Veterans Affairs Must Strengthen Its Human Resources Program	153
Attracting and Retaining a Quality Nursing Workforce	158
Volunteer Programs	163
VA Purchased Care	164
Information Technology	173
VHA Physician Assistant Recruitment and Retention	181
Support for Family and Caregivers of Severely Injured Veterans	183
Notes	187
Construction Programs	193
Major Construction Accounts	195
Minor Construction Accounts	195
Nonrecurring Maintenance Accounts	196
Capital Leasing	196
Empty or Underutilized Space at Medical Centers	197
Program for Architectural Master Plans	199
Architect-Led Design-Build Project Delivery	199
Preservation of Historic Structures	201
Education, Employment, and Training	203
<i>Education</i>	204
VA’s Coordination with State Approving Agencies Is Insufficient to Prevent Fraud	205
Metrics to Track GI Bill and Education Benefits Success Are Insufficient	206
Consumer Information for Potential Student Veterans Remains Insufficient	207
VetSuccess on Campus Must Extend to Serve More Student Veterans	208
<i>Employment and Entrepreneurship</i>	209
Military Transition Assistance Programs Must Be Relevant to Today’s Job Market	211
Move Veterans Employment and Training Service to the Department of Veterans Affairs	214
Veterans and Post-Service Licensure and Credentials	215
Veteran-Owned Businesses and the Federal Government	217
Reasonable Transition for Service-Disabled, Veteran-Owned Small Businesses	219
Non-VA Workforce Development Programs	220

<i>Training and Rehabilitation Services</i>	223
Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Funding Accountability and Performance Data	224
Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Eligibility and Insufficient Support for Education Tracks	225
Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment Productivity and Counseling Partnerships	227
VR&E and Dependents: Education Tracks Are Insufficient for a Significant Number of Disabled Veterans with Families	229
Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Staff Training and Continuing Education	230
VA Pension Work Disincentives	231
Congress Should Remove the Cap on the Independent Living Program	232
Notes	233
 National Cemetery Administration	 235
<i>NCA Accounts</i>	237
Operations, Maintenance, and National Shrine Initiative— The Veterans Cemetery Grants Program	238
Veterans’ Burial Benefits	239
 Tables	
1 VA Accounts FY 2014 (Dollars in Thousands)	3
2 NPPD Recorded Costs	99
3 Noise Levels—Common Military Operations	107
4 FY 2014 National Cemetery Administration (dollars in thousands)	237
 Graphs	
1 IOM Disability Model	19
2 FY13 Rural Outreach Sites	91
3 VhA PA NP Employment Trend	182