

THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET Veterans Agenda for the 116th Congress

Policy Recommendations for Congress and the Administration

Expanding VA's Caregiver Program to All Eras

VA will begin to extend eligibility for the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers to severely injured veterans of all eras, through a phased approach. First, VA must submit to Congress certification that the IT system relied upon by the program is prepared to accommodate a higher workload. Once the system is prepared, VA will begin processing applicants injured on or before May 7, 1975, in addition to those injured after September 11, 2001. Two years after this expansion, the program will accept all veterans severely injured in all eras.

When the program was launched in 2011, VA estimated some 4,000 veterans would apply. Over 45,000 did, demonstrating unmet need for services and supports for families. Currently, some 19,000 veterans access these services. In the years to come,

an estimated 76,000 veterans are likely to enter. The task before VA is monumental. The Caregiver program must correct current flaws while preparing to meet and serve a larger, older population of veterans.

The majority of veterans in the program are in their 30s. Having been injured young, they are still finding the new normal for their lives. Often, these veterans access services for three to four years before graduating out of the program when their conditions improve to a degree where a daily caregiver is no longer needed. As the program expands to include additional eras of service, this trend line will likely stop, as the majority of geriatric veterans are unlikely to see their independence improve to the point of no longer needing daily caregiving.

Expansion of VA Caregiver Assistance Program – Key Implementation Dates

Date	Deadline or Milestone Explanation
September 1, 2018	VA-Certified New IT Systems for Expanded Caregiver Program Are Ready
September 1, 2019	One Year After VA Certification, Caregiver Program Expands to Vietnam War and Prior Era Veterans
September 1, 2021	Three Years After Certification, Caregiver Program Expands to Post Vietnam through Pre-9/11 Era Veterans

Recommendations

- **VA must accommodate a more variable set of family members serving as caregivers.**

While older veterans' participation is unlikely to fluctuate, caregivers of older veterans likely will. Younger veterans tend to rely consistently on a spouse or a parent for care. Older veterans, on the other hand, are less likely to have a spouse still capable of the physical demands of providing daily care. We anticipate adult children, nieces, nephews, or other family or community members of veterans to provide care in greater numbers. It is not uncommon for families to rotate out primary care responsibilities after a period of time. This trend is likely to continue as the parents of post-9/11 veterans age out of their caregiving role in the decades to come. Adult children may alternate primary care providers over the course of a year with siblings and cousins. Effective communication with caregivers by caregiver support coordinators (CSCs), adequate provision of mental health services and respite, and tailored training that addresses issues of aging and disability are critical. Caregivers for pre-9/11 veterans are more likely to endure physical strain; maintaining a veteran with severe physical disabilities means they are bending and lifting for a duration that is likely to jeopardize their own health. VA must be able to accommodate rotating caregivers, and provide the adequate and relevant training they need in order to sustain their veteran and maintain their own health.

- **VA must implement and sustain the IT system required, prior to extending eligibility.**

Congress judiciously required an IT system be in place to properly manage and support the Program, avoid the delays in access, and immediately identify resource needs. The law required such implementation to be no later than October 1, 2018. According to VA, it has implemented a permanent IT solution for current Program participants. This system, however, is insufficient to support extending Program eligibility.

- **Eligibility determinations must clearly prioritize clinical need of veteran.**

In the years to come, the majority of program participants will be older veterans with greater challenges to their independence. Administrative and clinical eligibility determinations and personal care needs assessments will likely be more difficult to determine for elderly veterans – as will determining what needs are a result of service-connected injuries borne of non-service related reasons. Assessing the personal care needs of veterans based solely on service-connected conditions can be extremely difficult – especially when there are comorbid conditions contributing to the veteran's functional limitations. Spending clinical time picking apart the degrees of personal care needs necessitating a caregiver does not serve the well-being of the veteran and is an imprudent use of clinical time.

- **VA must sufficiently staff and resource the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers.**

Issues of insufficient resourcing and hiring of CSCs has burdened the program throughout portions of the country. VA must request sufficient resources for the management and staffing of this program. Without sufficient staff to respond to the needs of veterans, any efforts at successful expansion will be severely compromised. As noted by an August 2018 OIG report, VHA has not established a staffing model to ensure medical facilities are well-equipped to manage the current program's workload, including processing applications and routine monitoring of veterans and caregivers. The eligibility expansion will see the program triple in size. As of 2018, there are 20,000 post-9/11 participants. A total of 76,000 pre-9/11 veterans are expected to enter the program by full expansion in 2022. It is of highest importance that VHA right size and revise its program governance and workload as quickly as possible.