

MODERNIZE VA BENEFITS AND SERVICES TO

# PROMOTE VETERAN INDEPENDENCE



## Our View

Despite generous resources from the VA and DOD to empower veterans once they transition to civilian life, too often bureaucratic barriers hold them back from success. Reform is overdue and Congress should start by establishing an independent assessment and expert commission to provide recommendations for reforming and modernizing disability benefits and related services. The VA should provide necessary benefits and services for the seriously injured while promoting policies to help them achieve their full potential.

## Background

A new generation of veterans is entering the VA system. Nearly two decades of war have led to a significant increase in veterans seeking care and services from the VA. While the average cost of caring for and providing benefits for post-9/11 veterans remains relatively low according to CBO, the long-term needs of this, and older, veteran cohorts will test an outdated VA system.

The VA's disability system and related services should be modernized and shift from a compensation-focused benefits design towards a greater emphasis on rehabilitation, reintegration into their local communities, and greater economic independence. Trends in the newest generation of veterans are concerning – this includes low return-to-work ratios for veterans transitioning into civilian life after serving their country. Nearly half of post-9/11 veterans are seeking disability compensation, a rate significantly higher than previous generations of veterans. Even with major medical advances and new proven rehabilitation treatment options, much of the disability rating system used today was put in place in the 1940s. The VA's safety net should care for those injured while serving their country but also balance those benefits with the need for rehabilitation and economic independence.

## CONGRESS SHOULD

- **Conduct an Independent Assessment and Form a Commission on Disability Compensation** – In 2014, the VA Choice law created the independent assessment and the Commission on Care to provide analysis and reform proposals to the VA health care system. This same model should be duplicated to examine the VA's disability compensation practices, services, measure outcomes and effectiveness, study the long-term impact on veterans and provide recommendations for innovative policy and operational change.
- **Promote Economic Independence** – Congress should work to identify what the VA can do to foster greater economic independence in the veteran community by looking at the current burdensome transition process, connecting veterans to job opportunities, removing licensing barriers, promoting greater self-sufficiency, and improving customer service for benefits and services.

