

PURSUE RESPONSIBLE SPENDING AT THE

# DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS



For two decades, the VA has operated with dramatic unchecked spending increases. With a new generation of veterans entering the VA with different needs, services, and preferences, the VA should right-size its spending priorities to reflect a changing veteran population. Congress should seek to align VA spending and pursue an external audit and assessment of the VA.

## BACKGROUND

Today's veteran population is shrinking while total spending at the Department of Veterans Affairs increases significantly. No other federal department comes close to competing with the considerable rise in spending from the VA (excluding growth in interest payments on the federal debt and recent COVID-19 spending packages). Since 2001, the VA budget has increased 400 percent from \$45 billion to **exceeding \$245 billion** for FY2021. Additionally, from FY2016 to FY2021, the number of VA patients grew by a mere 3 percent while the number of VHA department personnel grew by 17.3 percent.

This trajectory of spending and staff growth is not sustainable. Structural changes should focus on the current veteran population and right-sizing the VA to care for the post-9/11 veteran cohort that is expected to consume **significant resources** over the next few decades.

More spending cannot be the only answer to the VA's challenges. Unrestrained funding over the last two decades has failed to prevent waitlist scandals, fraud, abuse, failed IT systems, and mismanagement in the VA system. Even with an infusion of funding and personnel, the VA's core problems have persisted. Congress and the Department of Veterans Affairs should take a step back and evaluate what is working and not working for current and future veterans.

## POLICY SOLUTIONS

**Audit the VA:** Pass the [The VA Assessment by Independent Measures Act](#) (H.R. 4626) by Reps. Bergman and Bost. This bill would require an independent audit of the VA every 10 years. This legislation is modeled after legislation passed after the Phoenix VA scandal that created an independent assessment that was key to laying the ground for the eventual passage of the VA MISSION Act. This independent assessment will include examining the VHA's needs, capabilities, resources, workforce, and culture and will be critical to future reform efforts.

**Examine Expiring VA Programs:** Instead of authorizing extensions of VA programs at the end of every fiscal year, the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committee should review and hold hearings and require the VA to justify the continuance of those programs, particularly those that exceed a certain threshold in cost to administer.

**Keep VA Spending On-Budget:** Since the VA MISSION Act passed, appropriators have [tried](#) to designate accounts within the community care program and others as emergency spending and exempt it from the defense base and non-defense base budget limits. Congress should not use our nation's veterans and budget gimmicks to justify spending increases. This disincentivizes Congress and the VA from taking a tough look at budget priorities and how to best provide the quality services and health care our veterans deserve.

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Updated January 2022