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**WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT**  
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**Submitted for:**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS**  
**COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES**  
**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**OVERSIGHT HEARING**  
**ON**

***“EXPLORE America250: Enhancing Accessibility at our National Parks and Public Lands”***

**April 22, 2026**

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands – thank you for the opportunity to submit Wounded Warrior Project’s perspective on implementation of the *Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences (EXPLORE) Act* (P.L. 118-234) and its intersections with our commitment to meeting the needs of veterans and family support members no matter what.

For 23 years, Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) has helped warriors and their families heal from the visible and invisible wounds of service and embrace a life of hope and renewed purpose. Working alongside Congress, other veteran service organizations, community partners, and many others, we have made incredible progress, but there is so much work left to do. With your support and that of our grateful nation, we will push the boundaries of what’s possible as we pursue the path to save a million more lives.

Throughout our organizational history, WWP has explored new and innovative ways to offer care and support to those we serve. Our nation-wide, adaptive-capable offerings may include activities like biking, hiking, fishing, hunting, archery, camping, and snow and water sports in pursuit of improvement in social, physical, and mental well-being. Two programs in particular – Project Odyssey and Soldier Ride – stand out for their unique approach, using outdoor settings and connecting warriors with nature to positively impact veterans’ mental and physical well-being.

Project Odyssey is a no-cost 12-week mental health program for veterans that uses adventure-based learning to help warriors with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety,

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and depression manage and overcome their unseen wounds, enhance their resiliency skills, and empower them to live productive and fulfilling lives. The Project Odyssey experience is structured around each warrior's unique needs. Warriors can participate in all-male, all-female, coed, family, or couple's programs. In 2025, we facilitated 139 Project Odyssey experiences with approximately 95% of those with exposure to the outdoors as part of the programming. Experiences like Project Odyssey underscore how structured, supportive engagement with the outdoors can help veterans strengthen coping skills and emotional well-being.

Soldier Ride is a unique, multi-day riding event that helps warriors build their confidence and strength through shared physical activities and bonds of service in a supportive environment. The program incorporates skill-building practices that accommodate all ability levels. Warriors never ride alone; they move forward together, as a unit, just as they did during their military service. In 2025, Soldier Ride held 75 in-person events with over 1,100 participants. Soldier Ride highlights how access to outdoor spaces, combined with shared physical activity, helps wounded warriors rebuild confidence, connection, and momentum in their recovery.

### **EXPLORE Act & Veteran Wellness**

We are grateful that the nation has made the America the Beautiful – National Parks and Federal Recreational Land Pass is available free of charge – offering annual or lifetime access – to current Service members and their dependents, Gold Star Families, and military veterans, encouraging outdoor exploration and recreation. Outdoor recreation's benefits to mental and physical health have been extensively studied and documented. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recognizes that engaging with nature can support veterans' mental health by reducing stress, improving mood, and strengthening coping skills through accessible, low-cost activities integrated into daily life. The South Central Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center's (MIRECC) *The Great Outdoors: Engaging with Nature for Mental Health* emphasizes that even brief, regular time outdoors can enhance well-being and emotional regulation for Veterans, including those facing barriers related to disability or mobility.<sup>1</sup>

The *EXPLORE Act* represents a critical step towards making these benefits more accessible to veterans, Service members, and their families. According to the U.S. Census Bureau and the Department of Labor, veterans represent a disproportionately large share of adults with disabilities nationwide, accounting for roughly one-sixth of the disability population despite comprising less than 7 percent of the total U.S. population. According to the Veterans Benefits Administration's Annual Benefits Report, roughly two million veterans who served after September 11, 2001, currently receive VA disability compensation for service-connected conditions, making post-9/11 veterans one of the largest and fastest-growing groups within the service-disabled veteran population.

While barriers to outdoor recreation caused by physical disability may be familiar to many, post-9/11 veterans are more likely than civilians and even other era veterans to have a

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<sup>1</sup> Austen Anderson, *The Great Outdoors: Engaging with Nature for Mental Health*, U.S. Dep't of Vet. Affairs, <https://mirecc.va.gov/MIRECC/VISN16/docs/the-great-outdoors-veteran-guide.pdf>.

cognitive disability.<sup>2</sup> This era of veterans have higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) as well as higher severity of these conditions.<sup>3</sup> TBI and PTSD can impair a person's ability to navigate by affecting spatial awareness, attention, memory, and emotional regulation. In outdoor environments, where conditions are less predictable and wayfinding cues are limited, these impairments can substantially increase cognitive load, disorientation, and perceived risk, even for individuals who are physically capable of completing a route. This is why clear, predictable, and pre-visit accessibility and trail information is essential to support safe, independent use.

### **Section 211. Accessible Recreation Inventory** *(Assessment due no later than January 4, 2030)*

Section 211 requires the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) to conduct a comprehensive, systemwide inventory of accessibility at federal outdoor recreation facilities and make that information publicly available. This agency collaboration is intended to assess existing conditions, identify gaps in published accessibility information, and improve communication about accessibility to help visitors make informed decisions before arriving on site. Improving awareness and distribution of this information will support more individuals to transition from more limited guided or organization-facilitated outings to self-directed recreation. Effective implementation will depend not only on physical infrastructure assessments but also on accessibility information that is accurate, clear, and usable without reliance on organization-based programs, supporting safe, independent planning.

#### **Key implementation considerations and recommendations**

- Assess bathroom accessibility as a core determinant of whether people with disabilities will participate in outdoor recreation, including both pathway access and interior features.
- Include transportation access in the inventory, recognizing that many people with disabilities rely on public or local transportation or organized transport services to reach federal lands.
- Evaluate parking availability for ADA-accessible vehicles and proximity to trailheads, facilities, and recreation areas, including surface conditions and vehicle size constraints.
- Inventory shaded areas with wheelchair-accessible picnic tables, including tables without fixed bench seating to support users with mobility devices.
- Catalog accessible water fountains, including height, reach range, and approach clearance for wheelchair users.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Vespa & Caitlin Carter, *Trends in Veteran Disability Status and Service-connected Disability: 2008–2022*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2024/demo/acs-58.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Hemant Thakur et al., *Demographic Profile and Service-Connection Trends of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury in US Veterans Pre- and Post-9/11*, 37 Fed. Pract. 128 (2020), available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32317849/>.

- Include boat launches, fishing piers, docks, and waterfront access features such as beach wheelchairs and matting systems.
- Ensure public-facing information clearly and accurately describes specific accessibility features rather than relying on general or subjective claims of “accessible.”
- Include website-based communication tools that allow visitors to request accessibility information or clarifications prior to visiting.
- Incorporate cognitive accessibility considerations such as clear trail markings, easy-to-read signage, predictable layouts, and simplified wayfinding to support visitors with PTSD, TBI, or sensory sensitivities.
- Include the presence and condition of Accessible Pedestrian Signals (APS) and safe crossing features where federal recreation areas connect to roads or parking areas.
- Identify whether emergency access points, communication limitations (such as lack of cell service), and known safety considerations are clearly documented for visitor planning.

## **Section 212. Trail Inventory**

*(Assessment due no later than January 4, 2032)*

Section 212 requires federal land management agencies – primarily the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and National Park Service (NPS) – to inventory high-priority trails and publicly report detailed accessibility characteristics. The section emphasizes transparency, consistency, and inclusion of trails that may be usable for individuals with assistive technology even if the trails do not fully meet Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) standards. Implementation choices will determine whether inventories meaningfully support trip planning, safety, and confidence for adaptive users. Effective implementation will depend on whether trail inventories provide consistent, detailed, and practical information that allows veterans using adaptive equipment to accurately assess trail conditions, safety considerations, and usability before arrival.

### **Key implementation considerations and recommendations**

- Ensure trail inventories go beyond width and include maintenance status, surface condition, grade, cross-slope, and usability with adaptive or assistive equipment.
- Address inconsistencies in trail difficulty ratings across jurisdictions, recognizing that color or rating systems vary by state and agency and can create confusion for adaptive users.
- Consider creating distinct designations for adaptive-friendly trails, such as adaptive-friendly green or blue classifications, to improve clarity and consistency.
- Identify accessible trail loops rather than trails that start or end arbitrarily or require downhill-only access that limits return options.

- Include clear documentation of obstacles, narrow points, pass-by or pull-off areas, and rest locations where users may pause without blocking the trail.
- Ensure trail information supports independent trip planning by clearly identifying accessible routes, exit options, and limitations that may affect self-guided use by veterans.
- Provide accurate and detailed parking information at trailheads, including surface type, distance to trail start, and vehicle accommodation.
- Explore the use of advanced tools such as drone overviews, trail previews, photographs, or terrain imagery to allow users to assess trail conditions, grades, obstacles, and wayfinding before arrival, particularly for veterans using assistive technology or managing cognitive or sensory considerations.
- Include information on emergency access, exit options, and proximity to emergency services to support safe planning, particularly on longer or remote trails.
- Note environmental and weather-related factors that affect accessibility, such as heat retention of surfaces, seasonal flooding, snowpack, or erosion.
- Where applicable, identify consistency or inconsistencies between federal, state, and local trail designation systems to reduce user confusion.

### **Section 213. Trail Pilot Program**

*(Establish pilot program no later than January 4, 2030; conduct trail measurements, develop accessible trails, and make minor modifications no later than January 4, 2032; and complete measurements due no later than January 4, 2032)*

Section 213 establishes a pilot program to test innovative approaches to improving trail accessibility, including measuring trails (e.g., width, slope, length), developing new accessible routes, and making modest modifications to existing trails. The program emphasizes stakeholder collaboration, preservation of natural character, and practical, scalable solutions. Effective implementation will depend on using the pilot program to test scalable, low impact solutions that balance accessibility, safety, and preservation of natural character while incorporating meaningful stakeholder input.

### **Key implementation considerations and recommendations**

- Select pilot locations that already demonstrate strong accessibility practices and can serve as national models for inclusive recreation.
- Prioritize locations where accessibility improvements can be achieved without extensive environmental disruption or loss of natural character.

- Focus on trails with manageable grades, predictable terrain, and clear pathways rather than extreme elevation gains that limit usability.
- Identify underutilized state or federal parks with strong potential for inclusive access, community engagement, and sustainable use.
- Use pilot projects to improve clarity of trail markings and integration of accessible routes into broader trail systems rather than isolated segments.
- Consider transportation access as part of pilot planning where participation depends on reaching remote or hard-to-access locations.
- Use pilot projects to test tools such as drone overviews or virtual trail recon to improve visitor understanding of terrain, elevation changes, obstacles, and accessible route options prior to arrival.
- Incorporate emergency access, communication limitations, and risk mitigation considerations into pilot planning and evaluation.
- Use pilot sites to evaluate how veterans transition from guided experiences to independent trail use when accessibility information, wayfinding, and safety features are clearly implemented.
- Test approaches that balance therapeutic use of remoteness with clear wayfinding and defined exit routes to reduce perceived risk for veterans with PTSD or TBI.

#### **Section 214. Accessible Trails**

*(Identification of sites due no later than January 4, 2026, Interim report due no later than January 4, 2028, Completion of Trails due no later than January 4, 2032)*

Section 214 requires agencies to develop new accessible trails or modify existing ones so that supporting features such as parking, bridges, and restrooms align with accessibility standards. The section balances accessibility goals with multiple-use considerations and land management requirements, emphasizing thoughtful design rather than uniform modification. Effective implementation will depend on thoughtful trail design, ongoing maintenance, and clear communication from land management agencies to the public about limitations to ensure accessible trails remain usable, safe, and well-integrated within multi use land management contexts.

#### **Key implementation considerations and recommendations**

- Use firm, stable surfaces such as compacted dirt, paved paths, or appropriate matting to support wheelchairs and mobility devices.
- Address steep grades by offering gradual alternatives, rolling routes, or rest pull-offs that allow users to stop safely without blocking the trail.

- Ensure sidewalks, connectors, and access points are clear of obstructions such as roots, foliage, or raised curbs that increase trip risk.
- Prioritize general upkeep and maintenance to preserve accessibility over time and prevent degradation that can negate earlier improvements.
- Avoid attempting to make every trail accessible, but ensure a meaningful percentage are intentionally designed and maintained for accessibility without stigma.
- Communicate clearly when certain trail features are inherently inaccessible due to natural conditions so visitors can plan accordingly.
- Consider the impact of climate and weather on trail materials, including surface temperatures and seasonal usability, when selecting or maintaining accessible routes.
- Ensure accessible trail development accounts for safe entry and exit points, particularly in areas where terrain conditions may change rapidly.
- Consider how accessible trail design supports repeat and independent use over time, particularly for veterans managing changing mobility or health conditions.

### **Section 215. Accessible Recreation Opportunities**

*(Identification of Locations for Development due no later than January 4, 2026; Interim report due no later than January 4, 2028; Completion of Development due no later than January 4, 2032; and Final Report due no later than January 4, 2032)*

Section 215 expands accessibility beyond trails by requiring agencies to develop or modify a wide range of outdoor recreation opportunities. The focus is on enabling meaningful participation in recreation, education, and wellness activities while integrating accessibility into the broader recreational experience. Effective implementation will depend on integrating accessibility into a broad range of recreation experiences in ways that feel inclusive, intuitive, and supportive of sustained participation rather than separate or specialized.

#### **Key implementation considerations and recommendations**

- Ensure accessible recreation opportunities allow people with disabilities to participate in ways that feel inclusive and integrated rather than add-on or segregated.
- Improve access to historically significant sites and interpretive materials, including plaques, exhibits, and waypoint markers that convey meaning and context.
- Make information accessible through multiple formats, supporting digital tools as well as printed and tactile materials for varied user needs.

- Emphasize building accessibility into design from the outset rather than retrofitting after development.
- Ensure supporting infrastructure such as restrooms, seating, shade, and parking are co-located with recreation opportunities to support sustained participation.
- Include accessibility of interpretive content such as audio described exhibits, captioned videos, and clear signage for visitors with visual or hearing impairments.
- Where tours or guided experiences are offered, consider availability of communication supports such as captioning or interpreters to ensure inclusive participation.
- Design recreation opportunities to support ongoing, independent engagement beyond one-time events, allowing veterans to return without additional organizational support.

## **Section 216. Assistive Technology**

Section 216 authorizes agencies to enter into partnerships or agreements to make assistive technology available on federal lands. This includes working with outfitters, guides, and service providers to support safe participation and meaningful access. Effective implementation will depend on the availability of appropriate adaptive equipment, trained staff, and operational support to ensure assistive technologies can be safely, reliably, and consistently used across federal lands.

### **Key implementation considerations and recommendations**

- Expand availability of adaptive equipment such as track chairs, terrain hoppers, and adaptive paddling equipment alongside traditional rental offerings.
- Ensure trained staff or guides are available to instruct users on proper and safe use of adaptive equipment and assistive technologies.
- Incorporate charging stations for power wheelchairs, track chairs, and other mobility devices to support longer visits.
- Incorporate cooling resources such as ice dispensers or cooling mechanisms for individuals with spinal cord injuries or neurological conditions.
- Offer simple, user-friendly systems to reserve adaptive equipment in advance to reduce uncertainty and planning barriers.
- Ensure digital tools support screen readers, audio tools, QR codes, and printed materials such as braille or tactile maps.
- Ensure availability of staff with subject-matter expertise to guide safe use, transport, and troubleshooting of adaptive equipment.

- Clarify operational considerations for adaptive equipment logistics, including storage, transport to trailheads or water access points, and on-site support.
- Where feasible, coordinate assistive technology availability with veteran employment or volunteer roles to support hands on assistance, maintenance, and user confidence.
- Promotion efforts will be most effective if success is measured by veteran awareness, utilization, and repeat engagement with public lands, not solely by dissemination of materials.

### **Section 217. Savings Clause**

Section 217 clarifies that nothing in Title II Subtitle A alters or weakens existing rights under the Architectural Barriers Act or the Rehabilitation Act. This provision preserves existing protections of the *Architectural Barriers Act of 1968* or section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973* while allowing agencies to enhance access through additional measures. Effective implementation will depend on ensuring new accessibility efforts align with and reinforce existing federal accessibility standards without creating conflicting requirements or diminishing established protections.

#### **Key implementation considerations**

- Maintain alignment with existing federal accessibility standards to avoid conflicting requirements.
- Use this section as a safeguard to ensure accessibility improvements supplement, rather than replace established accessibility protections.

### **Section 221. Promotion of Outdoor Recreation for Military Servicemembers and Veterans (*Development and dissemination of educational and public awareness materials due no later than January 4, 2027*)**

Section 221 directs federal agencies to collaborate with VA and the Department of War (DoW) to increase awareness of outdoor recreation opportunities for Service members and veterans, including information on adaptive access and the therapeutic benefits of outdoor engagement. Effective implementation will depend on proactive, coordinated outreach that reaches veterans where they are and clearly communicates how to independently access accessible and therapeutic outdoor recreation opportunities.

#### **Key implementation considerations and recommendations**

- Increase proactive outreach to veterans about free park access and accessible recreation options.

- Address gaps in awareness, particularly among veterans who do not learn about benefits until introduced by organizations or peers.
- Ensure materials clearly explain how veterans can access recreation opportunities independently and safely.
- Highlight the therapeutic uses of public lands for mental health, resilience, and connection.
- Promotion efforts will be most effective if success is measured by veteran awareness, utilization, and repeat engagement with public lands, not solely by dissemination of materials.

**Section 222. Military Veterans Outdoor Recreation Liaisons**  
*(Establishment of new agency position due no later than January 4, 2026)*

Section 222 establishes designated liaisons within federal agencies to coordinate veteran-focused recreation efforts, partnerships, and implementation across agencies. Effective implementation will depend on whether liaisons serve as active connectors between agencies, veteran serving organizations, and on the ground staff, with clear mechanisms to elevate and address identified access barriers.

**Key implementation considerations and recommendations**

- Ensure liaisons actively engage with veteran-serving organizations to understand real-world access challenges.
- Create consistent feedback loops so issues identified by veterans are tracked and addressed over time.
- Improve coordination with parks and recreation staff responsible for trail, facility, and land management decisions.

**Section 223. Partnerships to Promote Military and Veteran Recreation**

Section 223 authorizes partnerships with nonprofit, state, tribal, and local organizations to expand outdoor recreation opportunities for veterans. Effective implementation will depend on leveraging partnerships with organizations that bring demonstrated expertise in adaptive programming, safety, and veteran engagement to expand access and participation.

**Key implementation considerations and recommendations**

- Encourage partnerships with organizations that have demonstrated expertise in adaptive programming and safety.
- Recognize the role of paid vendors in reducing risk, increasing safety, and enabling reliable program delivery.

- Expand outreach to veteran organizations that are not currently being engaged by land management agencies.

**Section 224. National Strategy for Military and Veteran Recreation**  
*(Develop and make strategy public no later than January 4, 2026; update and publicize updates no later than January 4, 2030, and ongoing every 5 years after)*

Section 224 requires a coordinated national strategy to increase participation by service members, veterans, and Gold Star families in outdoor recreation. Effective implementation will depend on sustained interagency coordination, consistent messaging, and practical tools that support veteran engagement at the national, state, and local levels.

**Key implementation considerations and recommendations**

- Scale outreach beyond individual events and partners to reach veterans at a national level.
- Provide toolkits and resources to intermediary organizations and state partners to support local engagement.
- Ensure consistent coordination across agencies such as DoW, VA, and Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) programs.
- Encourage development of consistent, cross jurisdictional accessibility information standards so veterans encounter similar trail and facility information across federal, state, and local lands.’
- Align strategy goals with measurable indicators of veteran participation, health and wellness engagement, and accessibility utilization over time.

**Section 225. Recreation Resource Advisory Committees**

Section 225 requires inclusion of a veterans organization representative on Recreation Resource Advisory Committees (existing advisory bodies established under federal law and overseen by the USFS and BLM to inform recreation fee proposals and planning. Effective implementation will depend on meaningful incorporation of veteran perspectives that reflect lived experience and inform recreation planning and fee decisions in practical, actionable ways.

**Key implementation considerations and recommendations**

- Use focus groups and structured input sessions with veterans and people with disabilities to inform committee recommendations.
- Ensure advisory input reflects lived experience and practical access barriers encountered on federal lands.

## **Section 226. Career and Volunteer Opportunities for Veterans**

***(Implement pilot program no later than January 4, 2027; provide a brief to Congress no later than March 4, 2025; provide Congress with update no later than January 4, 2026; provide Congress with report on pilot due no later than January 4, 2026)***

Section 226 establishes a pilot program to employ veterans in conservation, land management, and outdoor recreation roles within DOI. Effective implementation will depend on creating clear pathways for veterans to apply their experience in outdoor recreation, accessibility, and stewardship while tracking long term employment and workforce outcomes.

### **Key implementation considerations and recommendations**

- Emphasize opportunities for veterans to serve as adaptive recreation staff, guides, or subject matter experts.
- Support pathways that value veterans' lived experience in improving accessibility, safety, and stewardship.
- Use reporting requirements to assess long-term employment outcomes and program effectiveness.
- Encourage placement of veterans with lived experience in adaptive sports and outdoor programming roles that directly support accessibility, safety, and visitor assistance.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Wounded Warrior Project once again extends our thanks to the Subcommittee on Federal Lands for its dedication to our nation's veterans. We are honored to contribute our voice to your discussion about *EXPLORE Act* implementation, and we are proud to support any additional initiatives under consideration that would enhance veterans' access to our nation's great outdoors. As your partner in advocating for these and other critical issues, we stand ready to assist and look forward to our continued collaboration.