
January 12, 2024

The Honorable Mike Bost
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
House of Representatives
364 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mark Takano
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
House of Representatives
550 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Bost and Ranking Member Takano:

In light of the Committee's January 11, 2024, hearing, Rural Access: Is VA Meeting All Veterans Where They Live?, attached please find Western Governors' Association (WGA) Policy Resolution 2023-08, Veterans.

In the policy resolution, Western Governors recognize the need to improve health care services for veterans, particularly in remote areas. The resolution calls for the expansion of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Community Care and Vet Centers, more flexibility in choosing health care providers, and the expansion of telehealth services in underserved areas. Western Governors also encourage VA to conduct an evaluation of the Veterans Transportation Services exam and implement improvements to the Highly Rural Transportation Grants Program to address transportation challenges faced by rural veterans.

I request that you include this document in the permanent record of the hearing, as it articulates Western Governors' collective and bipartisan policy positions and recommendations on this important issue.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. Please contact me if you have any questions or require further information.

Sincerely,



Jack Waldorf
Executive Director

Attachment



Policy Resolution 2023-08 Veterans

A. BACKGROUND

American military personnel often return home to a hero's welcome after completing their service, but they face a series of complex challenges. Veterans, whether they volunteered or were drafted, commonly confront a range of issues such as food insecurity, homelessness, unemployment, physical and psychological wounds, and bureaucratic barriers when seeking support services. Western Governors recognize the need to support veterans and address the challenges they face. With one-third of the known veteran population residing in western states, Governors recommend federal regulatory and statutory changes to foster an environment that facilitates access to support services for veterans and encourages further investment in initiatives tailored to assist them.

B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT

1. Western Governors urge the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to prioritize the integration of peer support services and behavioral health services for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) into mental health care models. Additionally, Western Governors urge the VA to address staffing models to support the increasing health concerns for memory care (Dementia, Alzheimer's) and other neurological disorders. VA should also provide continuous training and support for peer specialists and focus on developing and retaining the behavioral health care workforce. Western Governors have highlighted substantive health care workforce recommendations in our health care policy resolution. Ongoing evaluations should be conducted to ensure effective implementation of these practices, which should be disseminated across all VA health care settings to ensure broad access to peer support services for all veterans.
2. Western Governors acknowledge the importance of the VA Governor's Challenge and urge VA to continue its provision of support for programs aimed at effectively addressing the issue of veterans' suicide.
3. Recognizing the need to improve health program services for women veterans, Western Governors urge VA to take urgent action to address gaps in the VA health care system. Improving the promotion of, access to, and the quality of health care for women veterans is essential and requires timely and effective measures to be implemented across VA. Western Governors recommend that VA initiate research programs to study health issues specific to women veterans.
4. Western Governors recognize the significance of expanding access to health care services for veterans, especially those residing in remote areas. VA should take action to increase the accessibility of:
 - a. VA Community Care for veterans residing in areas that do not have access to VA health care facilities. It is imperative that VA consult with Governors to ensure

that veterans living in rural areas are not disadvantaged in accessing health care;

- b. Vet Centers for veterans living in rural areas, to ensure that they have access to necessary health services and support;
 - c. Health care professionals in rural areas, to provide flexibility for veterans and allow them to access the health care provider of their choosing; and
 - d. Telemedicine services, which are a vital tool that can help bridge the gap in accessing health care services.
5. Western Governors recommend that VA seek consultation and input from tribal leaders and communities to inform the development and administration of its programs and services for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian veterans.
6. To ensure that veterans have timely access to high-quality health care, Western Governors recommend that Congress prioritize providing VA with the necessary resources, authority, and ability to recruit, hire, train, and retain health care professionals. This includes physicians, nurses, mental and behavioral health providers, long-term care professionals, and administrative staff. In addition, Western Governors believe VA should streamline the hiring process, offer competitive salaries and benefits, and provide ongoing training and professional development opportunities for health care professionals.
7. Western Governors believe VA should collaborate with states and territories to improve and expand the Highly Rural Transportation Grants program. This includes identifying counties that require assistance, simplifying the application and implementation process, and consulting early with Governors for valuable input on their state's needs. Additionally, VA should reevaluate and expand the current eligibility criteria to ensure that more veterans can benefit from the program.
8. Western Governors urge VA to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the Veteran Transportation Services (VTS) exam and implement necessary revisions to reduce its complexity, facilitating the process for individuals to obtain a license to transport veterans to VA health care facilities and authorized non-VA health care appointments.
9. Western Governors call on VA to improve community care for veterans by enforcing timely referrals and appointments, particularly for programs like VA Community Care. VA should also streamline reimbursement processes to third-party health care providers in line with industry standards and ensure prompt access to services and increased provider participation.
10. To ensure that our nation's veterans receive the benefits and services they are entitled to in a timely and efficient manner, Western Governors urge VA to continue to improve and streamline the claims process, especially with the new Sergeant First Class (SFC) Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act (Pub. L. 117-168) claims.
11. Western Governors recommend that VA implement a policy allowing veterans to select their own care providers, including those who are not affiliated with VA health care

facilities. By doing so, veterans would have greater flexibility and choice when seeking health care services.

12. Western Governors recognize the necessity of conducting a comprehensive review of VA regulations regarding payments for State Veterans Homes and urge VA to consult with states to identify the unique needs of each state. Additionally, Western Governors recommend expanding coverage to include all specialty care services, and prioritize funding for specialized cognitive care.
13. Western Governors recommend that VA authorize and prioritize the expansion of VA programs to provide comprehensive financial support for third-party assisted living and nursing facilities, which offer varying levels of care for long-term care services to our nation's veterans.
14. Western Governors urge Congress to pass legislation that requires VA and the Department of Defense (DOD) to modernize their electronic health record-keeping systems and mandate VA to upgrade its overall technology infrastructure. These upgrades are necessary to streamline access to critical health information, enhance coordination between the two departments, and improve the claims process for veterans, which is a priority for the Governors.
15. Western Governors recommend that the federal government provide funding for state and congressionally chartered Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) to offset the costs of training and to enhance the workforce capacity of VSOs. This would help to improve the level of support and care provided to veterans and their families by such VSOs, ensuring that they have access to the resources and services they need to thrive.
16. Western Governors emphasize the need for VA to provide Veteran Services Officers with access to vital information, enabling them to better assist veterans in navigating VA's programs and services. This will ensure that veterans receive the support and resources necessary to thrive.
17. Western Governors recommend that VA expand its dental services to all veterans enrolled in the VA health care system, regardless of their service-connected dental issues or other narrow criteria.
18. Western Governors urge Congress to authorize and appropriate funds for VA to provide grants to state, territorial, and tribal governments. The purpose of these grants is to increase outreach and assistance to veterans and their families by raising awareness of benefits and aiding them in applying for VA benefits. Priority should be given to areas with high rates of veteran suicide and a shortage of Veteran Services Officers.
19. Western Governors support the idea that service members should be given the opportunity to receive credit or professional credentials for the training they undergo in the military, which can then be transferred to the private sector or educational institutions. This initiative will help veterans transition into civilian careers by providing them with the necessary credentials and recognition for the skills developed through their military service.

20. Western Governors urge Congress to provide diligent oversight over VA and DOD to ensure that transitioning service members receive comprehensive information on VA benefits at least twelve months prior to their transition to civilian life. This includes ensuring that service members are aware of the full range of programs and support services available to them.
21. Western Governors recommend that VA conduct a comprehensive study on their efforts to reduce homelessness and identify those programs that have provided the highest return on investment.

C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE

1. The Governors direct WGA staff to work with congressional committees of jurisdiction, the Executive Branch, and other entities, where appropriate, to achieve the objectives of this resolution.
2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to consult with the Staff Advisory Council regarding its efforts to realize the objectives of this resolution and to keep the Governors apprised of its progress in this regard.

This resolution will expire in June 2026. Western Governors enact new policy resolutions and amend existing resolutions on a semiannual basis. Please consult <http://www.westgov.org/resolutions> for the most current copy of a resolution and a list of all current WGA policy resolutions.