

Pursuant to Executive Order 14091 (February 16, 2023) on "Further Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government"

2023 Equity Action Plan Summary

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Delivering equity through VA

The core mission of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is to deliver quality health care and excellent benefits to meet the unique needs of all eligible beneficiaries. To advance equity, VA will foster a diverse and inclusive culture throughout the Department that advances equitable outcomes by providing all Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors with the world-class care, benefits, and memorial services they earned and deserve – no matter their age, race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or geographic location.

New strategies to advance equity

VA has identified five strategies for its 2023 Equity Action Plan through Veteran outreach events, including Veterans Experience Action Center (VEAC) events, town halls, listening sessions, and surveys; engagement with operational partners, including Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs); formal written invitations for public comments; and more. VA will continue to engage the public on these action areas, its progress, and next steps throughout the year and beyond.

1. Improve benefit outcomes for all Veterans by removing barriers that underserved eligible Veterans experience when seeking disability compensation.

Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors from historically underserved demographic groups are most likely to experience systemic barriers that negatively impact them in benefit outcomes and access to VA services. On July 26, 2023, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released its report: [VA Disability Benefits: Actions Needed to Further Examine Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Compensation \(GAO-23-106097\)](#) that recommended VA develop a documented, detailed plan to address limitations related to its race and ethnicity data for Veterans. To address these barriers and others, VA will:

- Staff the newly established Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Office of Equity Assurance to, among other actions, establish initiatives and track actions to ensure equity action plans and goals are achieved.
- Review each VBA benefit program to determine if there are systemic issues that create disparities within underrepresented groups and—where disparities are found—work to eliminate them

New strategies to advance equity

through specific action plans that could include improved policies, procedures, training, quality control, data, outreach, customer experience, and outcomes.

- Conduct a systemic data analysis using available socio-demographic data to assess VBA's benefit utilization populations, identify potential disparities, and understand the root cause(s) of any identified disparities using demographic data.
- Expand strategic partnerships with external partners (VSOs, local / state government, civic / non-profit partners, and others) and improve outreach to Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors, including those in underserved populations, to ensure they are aware of benefits available to them and provide them assistance on how to navigate the disability claims process.
- Conduct VBA studies and data analyses to address racial and ethnic disparities in the disability compensation process. As root cause analyses are completed, VBA will develop and implement plans to address actionable issues.

New strategies to advance equity

2. Advance health equity by reducing health disparities, ensuring access to high-quality care for every eligible Veteran and using equity-informed approaches to better reach underserved Veterans.

Veterans from historically underserved groups often experience difficulties receiving high quality care and achieving optimal health outcomes. To achieve equity, VA needs to identify disparities in clinical care in our system's hospitals and clinics and implement interventions to eliminate them and identify unmet social needs that underlie many inequities and connect Veterans with appropriate social services. To address these barriers and others, VA will:

- Increase and standardize collection and use of equity data (age, race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, geographic location, language preference, and other factors across Veterans Health Administration programs) in VA health records to support tracking disparities in health care outcomes among Veterans receiving care through VA at the national and local levels.
- Increase technical assistance and resources to VA medical centers (VAMCs) to address Veterans' unmet social needs (food insecurity, housing instability, utilities, legal, transportation, social isolation / loneliness, employment, education, and digital), the root causes of many identified disparities.
- Expand the use of equity to guide quality improvement approaches and integrate equity into existing VA quality improvement and performance monitoring processes, thereby creating more efficient and streamlined pathways for addressing health care disparities.

New strategies to advance equity

3. Enhance access and utilization of VA benefits and care by streamlining processes and increasing availability of tools, resources, and facilities. *Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors who are individuals with disabilities, have limited English proficiency, or are in rural areas, have experienced limited access to tools, resources, VA facilities and burial grounds. Additionally, women Veterans are more likely to face inequitable access and utilization due to a number of factors, including trust. To address these barriers and others, VA will:*

- Conduct VEACs using a marketing approach to maximize participation by underserved Veteran populations, with particular attention towards increasing trust as well as engaging Veterans who are not connected to VA.
- Launch the “I AM Campaign” in collaboration with internal and external stakeholders to increase women Veterans self-identifying as Veterans through empowerment and build a welcoming environment in VA.
- Make the Women Veterans Community Support Forum a permanent semiannual event, bringing together traditional Veteran organizations and nontraditional organizations across society to convene, inform, update, and create connections that will help increase awareness of the services and eligibilities for women Veterans through the organizations’ reach.
- Restructure and publish VA Directive 0801, Minority Veterans Program, to identify and strengthen the role of Minority Veterans Program Coordinators (MVPCs) in local communities. This restructuring will create additional access points.

New strategies to advance equity

- Improve access to care and benefits for underserved Veteran populations by leveraging existing human-centered design (HCD) insights on bright spots, pain points, and “moments that matter.”
- Establish a Center for Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Health as appropriated in FY 2023.
- Continue to improve access to burial services by working towards establishing cemeteries in rural areas.

4. Advance economic security by ensuring procurement practices reach underserved communities via increasing opportunities for Small Disadvantaged Businesses (SDBs), Women-Owned Small Businesses (WOSBs), and Historically Underutilized Business Zones (HUBZones). *VA operates a large and complex acquisition program. The Supplier Base Dashboard provided by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) illustrates that VA contracting is increasingly dominated by established vendors rather than new entrants. To address these barriers and others, VA will:*

- Increase collaborative outreach, education, and networking opportunities to reach SDB, WOSB, LGBTQ+, 8(a), and HUBZone firms. VA will identify and work with industry associations, other federal agencies, the U.S. Small Business Administration, and APEX accelerators to co-host education seminars.
- Offer outreach programs in which VA’s buyer organizations brief industry on their initiatives, challenges, and requirements to create access to opportunities in VA contracting for underserved communities.

New strategies to advance equity

- Implement a more robust, data-rich Forecast of Contracting Opportunities to provide small and underserved businesses with advanced information to market their capabilities to relevant program offices.
- Issue guidance to VA contracting personnel with the authority to make procurement decisions on how to improve opportunities to make awards to SDB, WOSB, and HUBZone firms.
- Continue to identify and measure “new entrants” for VA contract awards using VA Pathfinder, OMB, and the Budget Procurement Equity Portal.
- Continue internal training for VA’s buyers to ensure they understand the policy imperatives of small business utilization and know how to conduct market research to maximize small and underserved business participation.

5. Increase evidence-based decision making by improving the collection, quality, and accessibility of demographic and related data to ensure equity in the delivery of care and benefits to Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. *There is a historical lack of consistent collection and analysis of demographic data hampers evidence-based decision-making. GAO Report 23-106097 on VA disability benefits cites recommendations including that VA (a) develop a plan to address limitations with its race and ethnicity data and (b) conduct a comprehensive assessment of disability compensation to identify the root causes that could contribute to racial and ethnic disparities. To address these barriers and others, VA will:*

New strategies to advance equity

- Issue guidance on an enterprise standard for the collection of demographic data (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, sex, age, disability, national origin, Veteran status, income, location, religion, and Tribal enrollment) across VA and continue with the development of a VA-Wide Demographic Data Strategy. Align with OMB guidance, other federal policies, and best practices.
- Develop a baseline and maintain measurement of enterprise data quality scores for all demographic data currently collected in VA.
- Collaborate with stakeholders across VA, establishing a Collective Veteran Authoritative Dataset (CVAD) – a single, validated source of shared Veteran data (including demographic data) to be leveraged for analytics enterprise-wide.

What VA accomplished

Below is a sampling of VA's progress delivering on equity and racial justice since its first Equity Action Plan in 2022.

- ***Published a Request for Information (RFI) on June 20, 2023, for the public to provide data and information on minority and historically underserved Veterans.***
The Center for Minority Veterans (CMV) will use this input to improve outreach, education, engagement, enrollment, advocacy, and access programs for minority and historically underserved Veterans.
- ***Implemented The Sergeant First Class (SFC) Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act, the largest health care and benefit expansion in VA history.***
This law helps provide generations of Veterans with benefits and health care for exposure to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic substances. To help ensure that implementation of the law leads to equitable outcomes for all Veterans, among other actions, VA has: translated the PACT Act fact sheets into 13 languages, with additional languages in process; launched [VA.gov/PACT](https://va.gov/PACT), a comprehensive public-facing resource for Veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors; trained employees on the new law to better reach more veterans; and used PACT Act authorities to hire and retain more staff, resulting in nearly a 12,000 net increase of employees who helped provide services to nearly 122,000 new enrollees and process over 900,000 claims.

What VA accomplished

- ***Hosted the Here for H.E.R. (Hope. Education. Resources.) symposium in partnership with the Departments of Housing and Urban Development and Health and Human Services and the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans.***

The symposium shared information about Women's Health Transition Training, an overview of women's health, Vet Center services for women Veterans, fraud prevention, how to apply for benefits, an update on the PACT Act, and information on benefits and support unique to the Women Veteran Special Emphasis Program.

- ***Proposed modifications to the regulatory framework for eligibility determinations involving Veterans' military discharges that may be considered "dishonorable" for VA benefit eligibility purposes.***

The proposed revision of 38 C.F.R. § 3.12, Update and Clarify Regulatory Bars to Benefits Based on Character of Discharge, addresses disparities related to Veteran status and eligibility determination that are a major issue for homeless Veterans as well as LGBTQ+ and other minority Veterans. Rulemaking is still ongoing, and VA has made public-facing efforts to hear concerns from underrepresented groups such as through publishing a proposed rule in July 2020 in the Federal Register to amend 38 C.F.R. § 3.12 (85 FR 41471) [Update and Clarify Regulatory Bars to Benefits Based on Character of Discharge](#); publishing an RFI in September 2021 in the Federal Register for additional public commentary on aspects of the proposed regulation (86 FR 50513) Discharge; and holding listening sessions in October 2021.

What VA accomplished

- **Conducted VEAC events that address and solve issues about access to VA care and benefits enrollment for Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.**

VEAC events provide peer-to-peer connections, resources and immediate help for Veterans at-risk for homelessness. Events were held in Michigan, Texas, Montana, Colorado, California, Kentucky, Hawaii, American Samoa, and Guam. Launched first Pacific Region VEAC with a special emphasis on women Veterans, resulting in almost 30% increase in women Veteran engagement when compared to previous participation rates. Of 2,145 VEAC exit survey responses received in FY 2023, 873 respondents identified as either American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and / or Hispanic or Latino – an increase of 41% over FY 2022.

- **Enhanced the quarterly [VA-Wide Trust Survey](#) in October 2021, to capture voluntary, self-reported expanded demographic options for race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation to identify trust scores for underserved populations.**

These metrics are reported each quarter as part of [VA's I*DEA Agency Priority Goal \(APG\) for the FY 2022-FY 2023 Cycle](#) and from the first quarter of FY 2022 through the third quarter of FY 2023, statistically significant increases in trust occurred across 10 of the 26 enhanced demographic domains. When comparing the third quarter of FY 2022 trust scores with the third quarter of FY 2023 trust scores, VA saw statistically significant increases across 19 of the 26 domains.