

Economic Opportunity

The VFW's Concerns:

The COVID-19 pandemic has produced dire economic consequences in the United States. It has halted the longest period of economic growth since the end of World War II. Numerous Americans are out of work, and many have difficulty providing for basic needs.

Veterans have not been spared this harsh reality. The unemployment rate for veterans has nearly doubled from 3.1 percent in 2019 to the current rate of 5.5 percent. Unemployed veterans would greatly benefit from a relief package that would provide job training resources for high-demand vocations so they can reenter the workforce.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is comprised of three administrations—the National Cemetery Administration (NCA), the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), and the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). Each administration has its own budget and provides different services to veterans. VBA is the largest of the three and oversees the delivery of compensation and pension benefits, the GI Bill, vocational rehabilitation, housing and business loans, and the broadly defined transition assistance program, which is shared with the Departments of Labor (DOL), Defense, and Homeland Security.

The VFW believes economic opportunity is a lifelong need. In reality, not all veterans seek VA health care benefits after they are discharged. Others still do not require or prefer not to receive compensation and pension or burial and memorial benefits. However, the vast majority of veterans do indeed seek meaningful employment, education, or job training. Accordingly, a fourth administration must be established in VA to properly address veterans' economic opportunity benefits utilization and growth, and the improvement thereof. In turn, the new Under Secretary for Economic Opportunity would have the authority to refocus resources, independently promote these programs to veterans, and create a central point of contact for veterans organizations and Congress.

Under the automotive adaptive grant program, VA is authorized to provide a one-time grant of \$21,488.29 to veterans who are unable to drive due to a service-connected disability. This grant may be used for the purchase of a specially equipped automobile. However, a single-use grant for vehicle adaptations is not enough considering the average American owns multiple vehicles in their lifetime. Veterans who have previously received a grant must pay any expenses associated with the purchase of a new vehicle themselves. The cost of replacing a modified automobile with a used or new vehicle ranges from \$21,000 to \$65,000, which is a substantial sum for most consumers. These substantial costs, coupled with inflation, present a financial hardship for many disabled veterans who need to replace their primary mode of transportation once it reaches its life of service.

The VFW's Solutions:

- Congress must pass the Veterans Economic Recovery Act, which would create a rapid retraining program to provide certain veterans and reservists with 12 months of benefits to pursue training in high-demand occupations.
- Congress must pass legislation that would establish a fourth administration in VA, the exclusive focus of which would be economic opportunity benefits.
- Congress must pass legislation to permit veterans to receive an automobile grant every ten years in an amount equal to the grant maximum at the time of vehicle replacement.