

# **RURAL VETERANS TRAVEL ENHANCEMENT ACT OF 2021**

## **Section 1. Short Title**

## **Section 2. Permanent Transportation Authority**

This section will make permanent VA's authority to transport eligible veterans and family members to or from VA facilities or other locations for the purpose of receiving care, vocational rehabilitation, or counseling. The program is essential to connecting veterans to care and has been consistently reauthorized on a bipartisan basis since 2014.

## **Section 3. Permanent Highly Rural Transportation Grants**

This section makes permanent VA's authority to provide Highly Rural Transportation Grants (HRTG) to Veteran Service Organizations and state veteran service agencies for assisting highly rural veterans' travel for health care. This program has been consistently reauthorized on a bipartisan basis since 2014.

## **Section 4. GAO Report on Fraud, Waste and Abuse of the VA Beneficiary Travel Program**

GAO has previously, but not recently, assessed the Department's Beneficiary Travel program and made a number of recommendations to address significant fraud and waste within the program. This assessment is especially timely following the rollout of VA's new processing system, which was in part intended to reduce fraud. Congress needs to know where this program stands now in its efforts to ensure its funding is making it into the right hands.

## **Section 5. GAO Report on the Effectiveness of the Beneficiary Travel Program's Mileage Reimbursement and Deductible Amounts**

The last mileage reimbursement increase for veterans Beneficiary Travel benefits, which is intended to defray costs of transportation to and from health care appointments, was in 2010. Since then, the reimbursement has been 41.5 cents per mile after a \$6 round trip deductible. Comparatively, the GSA rate for 2021 is 56 cents per mile and increases automatically each year. This report will assess the effectiveness of the current Beneficiary Travel reimbursement rate, the usefulness and origins of the deductible amount, and other options for further encouraging veterans, especially low-income veterans, to seek the care they need.

## **Section 6. Advance Reimbursement Pilot Program for Low Income Veterans**

VA hopes its new online Beneficiary Travel reimbursement system will reduce the wait time for transportation reimbursements to veterans. However, low-income veterans who sometimes cannot afford the roundtrip cost of gas up front and used to receive real time cash reimbursements are still left in a bind. This section requires the Department to establish a five-year, five-site pilot program through which veterans already identified as low-income can receive their reimbursement 48 hours in advance of their confirmed medical appointments.

## **Section 7. Pilot Program for Travel Cost Reimbursement for Accessing Readjustment Counseling Services**

The Department and Congress both wish to defray costs of travel for seek the extensive valuable resources provided by Vet Centers. Existing programs do not cover all veterans who might seek these resources and do not account for atypical medical appointments. Many Vet Centers have already attempted to defray these costs through gas card programs, but the resources supporting those programs were unreliable, insufficient, and sometimes unregulated. This section would establish an official a five-year, five-site pilot program run by the Vet Centers to reimburse veterans determined to be experiencing financial hardship. Reimbursement would be provided in advance of their appointment by appropriate methods chosen by VA. Preference for Vet Center participation in the program will be given to those in rural, highly rural, or tribal areas.

## **Section 8. Public Transportation Expansion Pilot Grant Program**

While some medical appointments are covered by existing transportation services, veterans still struggle to access same-day services or non-medical VA resources. This section requires VA to establish a five-year, five-site pilot grant program for state, county, tribal, and city governments connect public transportation services to facilities that serve veterans. This would not only connect veterans to VA resources, but also connect those residing at those facilities to groceries, job services, recreation, and more.