

At a Glance

S. 3293, Post-9/11 Veterans' Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2021

As reported by the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs on December 15, 2021

By Fiscal Year, Millions of Dollars	2022	2022-2027	2022-2032
Direct Spending (Outlays)	0	0	0
Revenues	0	0	0
Increase or Decrease (-) in the Deficit	0	0	0
Spending Subject to Appropriation (Outlays)	*	357	not estimated
Statutory pay-as-you-go procedures apply?	No	Mandate Effects	
Increases on-budget deficits in any of the four consecutive 10-year periods beginning in 2033?	No	Contains intergovernmental mandate?	No
		Contains private-sector mandate?	No

* = between zero and \$500,000.

The bill would

- Require the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to hire and train additional mental health care personnel
- Expand the availability of mental health consultations to veterans who submit a claim for disability compensation for a mental health diagnosis connected to military service and to veterans who receive homelessness services from VA
- Authorize VA to provide additional loan repayment benefits and scholarships to eligible applicants who take positions in mental health care with the department
- Require several reports and studies about treatments and benefits related to substance use disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders, brain health, and other areas of mental health care

Estimated budgetary effects would mainly stem from

- Increasing the number of VA's mental health care providers
- Providing more mental health consultations
- Providing additional loan repayment benefits and scholarships

Areas of significant uncertainty include

- Anticipating the number of veterans who would elect to receive a mental health consultation from VA
- Predicting the rate at which VA will hire additional personnel

Detailed estimate begins on the next page.

Bill Summary

S. 3293 would require the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide mental health consultations to veterans who are seeking other VA benefits. The bill also would require VA to hire, train, and recruit additional employees who specialize in mental health care. Finally, the bill would require VA to conduct several studies related to mental health.

Estimated Federal Cost

The estimated budgetary effects of S. 3293 are shown in Table 1. The costs of the legislation fall within budget function 700 (veterans benefits and services).

Table 1.
Estimated Increases in Spending Subject to Appropriation Under S. 3293

	By Fiscal Year, Millions of Dollars						2022-2027
	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	
Workforce Expansion							
Estimated Authorization	0	10	18	29	41	53	151
Estimated Outlays	0	8	16	27	39	51	141
Mental Health Consultations							
Estimated Authorization	*	25	27	28	29	30	139
Estimated Outlays	0	22	26	27	28	29	132
Loan Repayments and Scholarships							
Estimated Authorization	0	11	12	12	12	12	59
Estimated Outlays	0	11	12	12	12	12	59
Research							
Authorization	20	0	0	0	0	0	20
Estimated Outlays	*	18	2	0	0	0	20
Studies, Reports, and Outreach							
Estimated Authorization	0	4	1	*	0	0	5
Estimated Outlays	0	3	1	1	0	0	5
Total Changes							
Estimated Authorization	20	50	58	69	82	95	374
Estimated Outlays	*	62	57	67	79	92	357

* = between zero and \$500,000.

Basis of Estimate

For this estimate, CBO assumes that the legislation will be enacted in late fiscal year 2022 and that the estimated amounts will be appropriated each year. Under that assumption, VA could incur some costs in 2022, but CBO expects that most costs would be incurred beginning in 2023 to account for the time necessary to draft and implement regulations. Estimated outlays are based on historical spending patterns for the affected programs.

Spending Subject to Appropriation

Implementing S. 3293 would increase spending to provide health care, award scholarships and loan repayment benefits to health professionals, conduct research, perform studies, and prepare reports. Those costs would total \$357 million over the 2022-2027 period; such spending would be subject to the appropriation of the estimated amounts.

Workforce Expansion. Title 2 of the bill would require VA to expand its workforce. CBO estimates that the department would begin hiring additional personnel in 2023 and that satisfying that requirement would cost \$142 million over the 2022-2027 period.

Section 202 of the bill would require VA to add 500 paid trainee positions in areas of psychiatry, psychology, social work, therapy, and other mental health disciplines. Using salary data from VA, CBO expects that the department would hire the additional trainees at an average compensation of \$80,000. CBO estimates that it would take four years to completely fill those positions and cost \$103 million over the 2022-2027 period.

Section 201 would require VA to hire 100 full-time employees to support the delivery of mental health care at its Vet Centers, which are VA facilities that provide social and psychological services to veterans, military service members, and their families. Those employees would reach out to veterans at Vet Centers and in the community to inform them about the mental health services VA provides. Using data on salaries for VA support staff CBO estimates that compensation would average \$90,000 per employee. After accounting for time needed to hire those employees, CBO estimates that those staff would cost \$39 million over the 2022-2027 period.

Mental Health Consultations. Section 102 would require VA to offer mental health consultations to veterans who apply for disability compensation for a mental health condition that is connected to military service. The department would be required to offer that consultation within 30 days after claims are filed, regardless of whether the claim is approved. Based on historical data about approved and denied claims related to mental conditions, CBO expects that about 254,000 veterans will apply for disability compensation related to a mental health diagnosis each year and about 50 percent would use the offered service. Using an average cost of \$215 per consultation, CBO estimates that providing the service would cost \$132 million over the 2022-2027 period.

The bill also would require VA to provide mental health consultations to veterans who start using services from the department's Homeless Programs Office. VA estimates that 2,000 additional veterans start using those services each year. CBO expects that half of those veterans would accept the consultation. Thus, CBO estimates that providing those mental health consultations would cost \$1 million over the 2022-2027 period.

In total, implementing section 102 would cost \$133 million over the 2022-2027 period.

Loan Repayment and Scholarships. Section 203 would require VA to provide additional financial incentives to improve recruiting and hiring of VA personnel. CBO expects that VA would begin providing those incentives in 2023. In total, CBO estimates that satisfying that requirement would cost \$58 million over the 2022-2027 period.

The Education Debt Reduction Program is available to qualified health care professionals who take patient care positions at a VA medical facility that are otherwise difficult to fill. Qualified candidates may receive up to \$200,000 to pay their student loans. Section 202 would authorize annual appropriations of \$8 million to provide at least 200 debt reduction awards per year. CBO estimates that providing that benefit would cost \$40 million over the 2022-2027 period.

VA awards scholarships to applicants pursuing degrees or training in health care fields where it has staffing shortages. Recipients of the scholarship must fulfill a service obligation at a VA medical facility. Section 203 would require VA to provide 50 additional scholarships for applicants pursuing training in the mental health disciplines. In 2021, the department awarded individual scholarships of \$67,000. After accounting for inflation CBO estimates that expanding the scholarship program would cost \$18 million over the 2022-2027 period.

Research. The bill would specifically authorize appropriations totaling \$20 million for VA to conduct research in several areas. Section 101 would authorize \$5 million for VA to conduct in-home sleep studies as part of their treatment for veterans who have insomnia and other sleeping disorders. Section 301 would authorize \$10 million for VA to study suicides among veterans and best practices to provide early intervention and support. Section 303 would authorize \$5 million for VA to research traumatic brain injury and stress disorders treatments for veterans who served after September 11, 2001.

Studies, Reports, and Outreach. Several provisions of the bill would require VA to conduct studies and deliver reports to the Congress on treatments and benefits related to post-traumatic stress disorder, substance use disorder, sleep disorders, and other programs related to mental health care for veterans, their families, and caregivers. Other provisions would require VA to encourage veterans to pursue careers in mental health and to use VA's mental health services. Using information on the cost of similar studies, reports, and outreach efforts, CBO estimates that satisfying those requirements would cost \$5 million over the 2022-2027 period.

Uncertainty

CBO's spending estimate would depend largely on the number of veterans who would elect to receive a mental health consultation from VA and how long it would take the department to fill the additional health care positions that would be required by the bill. Costs would differ if those factors were higher or lower than CBO estimates.



Pay-As-You-Go Considerations: None.

Increase in Long-Term Deficits: None.

Mandates: None.

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