



## Standing with our Veterans and Servicemembers

The men and women who fight for and defend our country sacrifice so much, and in turn, we must uphold the promises we made when they return to civilian life. As Governor, Steve has worked hard to honor our commitment to our veterans by improving access to healthcare, expanding job training, and making it easier and more affordable for to attend college. These issues are particularly challenging for rural veterans, who often have access to fewer resources in their local communities.

As President, Steve will build on this success in Montana and ensure every veteran gets a fair shot at a better life.

### Protecting Every Veteran's Access to Healthcare

President Trump has tried to privatize the VA, **which would lead to longer wait times for veterans to access care and higher costs for taxpayers.**<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Steve will work to fully fund and staff the VA network so that veterans can have access to health care.

- **Privatization can lead to diminished access for veterans** and reduce access to quality healthcare for certain veterans as private companies would **avoid more costly patients.**
- Veterans often need specialty care for service-connected injuries, which may be more challenging for non-VA medical professionals to address.

Instead, we need to improve the VA to make sure it serves our veterans' needs. To achieve this, Steve will:

- Work with Congress to **ensure that VA funding is targeted to improving the VA patient experience, improving benefit claims processing and building a new VA staff by implementing new loan forgiveness plans to ensure there are enough doctors, nurses, and support staff to meet our veterans' needs.**
  - How: Steve will propose budgets for the VA that prioritize VA
- Continue efforts to **improve veterans' experience** with the VA through training programs like the Red Coat Ambassador Program.
  - How: Steve will direct the VA to prioritize patient care rather than relying on 3rd-party contractors to manage patient care.
- Plan **future VA Medical Centers and other facility investments around veterans' changing demographics, expectations, and locations.** It is critical that veterans can easily access healthcare facilities.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://psmag.com/social-justice/privatizing-the-v-a-is-not-cheap>

- Expand the number of VA clinics, **including mobile clinics**, especially in rural America. But where VA facilities are impractical, use a private facility or larger VA hospital.
  - How: Steve will push Congress for additional funds for new facilities.
- Investigate the possibility of **partnering with the Reserve and National Guard to place VA clinics in Guard and Reserve Armory spaces**, through expansion of facilities or shared use space. There are Armories across America in more communities than VA hospitals that would provide easy access to Veterans.
  - How: Steve will direct the VA to work with Reserve and National Guard forces to look into this idea.
- **Further shorten wait times for veterans.** Already, great strides have been made to shorten wait times<sup>2</sup>, and we should continue to focus on this as one of our top priorities.
  - How: Steve will direct the VA to continue to prioritize this. It will require additional funds for personnel and facilities, as shortening wait times requires more staff.
- Ensure that the **VA is fully staffed**. There are currently 49,000 vacancies at the VA, which makes the VA less able to help veterans.<sup>3</sup>
  - How: Steve will direct the VA leadership to ensure that these vacancies are prioritized and filled. If necessary, he will work with Congress to pass additional funding to ensure these positions can attract competitive applicants.
- **Expand the use of part-time caregivers at VA facilities.** There are doctors, nurses, PA's, and nurse practitioners across America that would be willing to support our veterans for loan forgiveness. Partnering with private hospitals to work loan forgiveness for caregivers that support VA facilities would be a win-win for both organizations.
  - How: Steve will instruct the VA to enact this policy to ensure improved health care for our veterans.

### Ensuring Veteran and Retiring Servicemember Healthcare and Wellbeing

As President, Steve will make sure our healthcare system meets our veterans' needs.

- Work with Congress to increase funding for **veterans healthcare, especially for mental health**.
  - How: This requires legislation, although Steve will set the tone by requesting additional funding in his budget request.
- **Expand TAP programming to ensure all servicemembers transitioning to civilian life know their healthcare options**, including TRICARE, private health insurance, and have assistance in evaluating their options. Right now, TAP includes

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5184>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/va-struggles-to-fill-hospital-jobs-it-has-49000-openings-across-the-country/2019/11/05/91fb-d4fe-ff4f-11e9-9777-5cd51c6fec6f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/va-struggles-to-fill-hospital-jobs-it-has-49000-openings-across-the-country/2019/11/05/91fb-d4fe-ff4f-11e9-9777-5cd51c6fec6f_story.html)

discussing the benefits available to veterans, but there needs to be more information on the types of support veterans often need and where they can go to obtain help.

- How: Steve will modify the TAP Programming by directing the Department of Defense (DoD) to change their existing policies.
- Introduce a **“Family TAP” to assist family members as their loved ones transition back to civilian life.**
  - How: Steve will request an additional \$30M from Congress to fund this program. The existing program costs \$100M, but lots of the existing curriculum can be used for these families so this would cover additional staff and outreach.
- **Enroll retiring servicemembers not eligible for VA care automatically in TRICARE** with an opt-out option.
  - Currently, veterans who were deployed to a combat area are eligible for enrollment in VA healthcare up to five years after returning home. However, servicemembers who are retiring have to opt-in to TRICARE during a 90-day window, or risk losing access for good. Steve believes that military service should be respected regardless of recent deployment status. Thus, under Steve’s plan, retirees would automatically be enrolled in TRICARE unless they choose otherwise
  - How: Steve will direct the DOD to change their existing policies. However, this could also require additional funds if it results in a significant increase in the number of people enrolled in TRICARE.
- Build a **medical documentation system** that automatically transfers military service and medical records to the VA system
  - Work with Congress to secure funding for this initiative.

### Prevent Veteran Suicide

[Every day, approximately 20 veterans](#) lose their life to suicide. This is unacceptable. To change this, Steve will take several immediate actions:

- **Increase funding for the VA’s Executive Director for Suicide Prevention office** to enable them to provide more adequate support.
  - How: Steve will accomplish this by identifying funds internally at the VA.
- Direct the VA and DoD to **conduct studies to understand the root causes of the higher suicide rate**, along with recommendations for how to address them.
  - How: Steve will direct the Defense Suicide Prevention Office and the VA Suicide Prevention Office to prioritize this.
- Include more **direct discussion** on suicide prevention for veterans as part of their separation from active duty.
- Work with the VA to **promote partnerships with nonprofits** working on suicide prevention, including non-traditional mental health therapies such as equine therapy and outdoor recreation therapies.
  - How: Steve will direct the VA to promote these partnerships.

- And as commander-in-chief, Steve will **lead the effort to break-down barriers to mental health care** that still exist in the military.
  - Make mental health services available for everyone within the ranks to assist servicemembers before they ever depart military service.
  - Expand the use of VA peer to peer networks in communities across America so that veterans have peer support from individuals who have similar experiences.
  - How: Steve will direct the DoD and VA to destigmatize mental health in their policies; and hold top generals accountable for progress in pushing de-stigmatization down through the ranks

### Ensuring Economic Opportunity

Our veterans deserve a fair shot at a new career after their military service. That is why as President, Steve will:

- Enact policies to **increase hiring of veterans** in the public and private sector:
  - Reestablish the **Joining Forces Initiative** to encourage veteran hiring in the private sector.
    - How: Steve will do this through an executive order.
  - Work with Congress to **increase support for the Veterans Employment Center** and provide active assistance to veterans for career services (e.g., resume writing, practice job interviews).
    - How: This will be done either through identifying existing funds or working with Congress to pass legislation to obtain additional support.
  - Direct federal agencies to **increase the number of contract set-asides** for veterans.
    - How: Steve will direct federal agencies to do this.
  - Partner with large industries through federal tax incentives on hiring Veterans, Guard and Reserve members.
    - How: Steve will work with Congress to pass these incentives.
- **Increase SBA funding available for veterans looking to start small businesses.**
  - How: This will be done either through identifying existing funds internally at the SBA, or work with Congress to secure additional funding.
- Work with corporations to offer benefits to veterans **looking to start franchise businesses.**
  - How: Steve will use the bully pulpit of the Presidency to urge companies to adopt these practices.
- **Expand upon the Veterans Benefits and Transition Act** and provide additional funding to ensure veterans are able to receive adequate support when they come back home.
  - How: This requires legislation, but is a popular bipartisan policy.

- Increase funding for programs to **counter and eliminate veteran homelessness**. Great strides have been made since 2010, but we need to do more to ensure every veteran has a safe place to live.
  - Work with Congress to further support **rapid rehousing** programs in different communities to ensure all veterans have access.
  - Provide **additional funding for HUD's Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH)** to ensure that veterans, particularly those with disabilities, have a place to live.
  - How: This requires legislation, but is a popular bipartisan policy.
- Direct the VA and Department of Education to fast track **veterans who are eligible for debt forgiveness** to avoid economic hardship.
  - How: Steve will direct the VA and Department of Education to enact this policy.
- Lengthen **foreclosure protection** for veterans from one year to three years after active service.
  - How: This requires legislation to amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, 50 USC 3953. This could possibly be accomplished through the CFPB.
- Leverage the **employee assistance programs throughout the federal government** to be available for all veterans and servicemembers active or retired.
  - How: Steve will direct all federal agencies to make their employee assistance programs available to veterans and servicemembers.
- **End the “widows tax”** which creates unnecessary hardship on families as they are grieving for their loved ones who died protecting our country.
  - Steve will work with Congress to enact this legislation.
- Reverse the **high taxes levied on the benefits** given by the Defense Department to children of deceased service members.
  - Steve will work with Congress to enact this legislation.
- Provide resources to establish **Veteran Treatment Courts**.
  - How: This requires legislation.

### Education

Many veterans want to pursue their educational goals, and the federal government needs to support them in their efforts. That is why, as President, Steve will make sure that every veteran has the opportunity to receive the education they want.

- Direct the DoD to expand Credentialing Opportunities On-line and make it more readily available for all veterans so that **skills learned in the military can easily be translated into civilian life qualifications**:
  - Work with employers to identify the **skills they need for certain positions and which corresponding military roles match that skill requirement**.
  - Ensure that veterans understand **how to stack their credentials to demonstrate their qualifications**.

- How: Steve will work with the DoD, VA, Department of Labor, and private employers to enact these initiatives.
- Ensure that skills earned in the military can be **used for credits at education institutions**.
  - Steve will direct the Department of Education to lead this initiative and partner with the Department of Education, Department of Labor, relevant state agencies, and education institutions to give credits for relevant military experiences.
- **Streamline professional licensing process for spouses** who move to another state.
  - Steve will direct the Department of Labor to work with State and professional credentialing agencies to expedite this process in other states.
- Expand **Skillbridge program** which allows servicemembers who are 6 months out from leaving service to work for a company and receive full benefits.
  - How: Steve will direct the DoD to expand this program.
- Ensure the entire federal government, from the VA to the Justice Department and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, **holds for-profit education institutions accountable for defrauding veterans**.
  - How: Direct federal agencies to prioritize these investigations.
- Work with education institutions to **establish veteran centers** to ease the transition to academic life.
  - How: Work with education institutions to establish these. Models for this exist at many universities in Montana.

### Rural Veterans

Rural America [sends](#) more sons and daughters into the military than anyplace else, and many of them return home to these [same areas](#) after their service. But too often, veterans in rural communities face greater challenges with access to healthcare and jobs. Therefore, as President, Steve will enact a number of changes to ensure additional support for these veterans.

- Ensure that every rural veteran receives information on the **closest healthcare facilities available to veterans**.
  - How: This will be done internally at the VA.
- **Expand telehealth and tele-mental-health outreach initiatives**.
  - How: This will be done internally at the VA and through legislation that increases funding for the VA to improve its IT budget.
- For communities with no VA presence, or where it is not feasible to access, work with **local healthcare providers to enable veterans to receive care in their local communities**.

- How: This will be done primarily through existing legislation and policy at the VA. It may require additional legislation to adequately fund.
- Expand the **Rural Veterans Outreach (RVO) program** nationally to ensure active outreach and community building for veterans in rural communities.
  - How: Direct the VA to expand this program from the West region.

### Female Veterans

Although women represent 10% of our veterans and 20% of active duty soldiers, existing policies often do not reflect their needs. Therefore, Steve will:

- Ensure that his VA **designs and makes available prosthetics that are specifically designed for women.**
  - How: Have the VA change internal guidelines. This also requires partnering with healthcare providers to modify their policies.
- Direct the DoD and VA to develop **additional gender specific care guidelines** (some exist but are not sufficient) to ensure that women have access to the healthcare they need, such as breast cancer screening.
  - How: Have the DoD and the VA change internal guidelines.
- Ensure that female veterans receive adequate **PTSD support, especially when resulting from trauma.**
  - Expand VA eligibility to those military sexual trauma (MST) Guard and Reserve individuals who are otherwise unavailable for VA care.
  - How: Have the DoD and the VA change internal guidelines.

### Veterans from Diverse Backgrounds

Veterans from diverse backgrounds sometimes require additional support to maximize the benefits they've earned. As President, Steve wants to make sure that every veteran, no matter their background, is successful in civilian life.

- Increase **communication to veterans from diverse backgrounds:**
  - Partner with **local community organizations**, such as community organizations and Churches, to share benefits and programs.
  - Work with local veterans advocacy groups to ensure that veterans are **aware of healthcare benefits.**
  - How: Direct the VA and other federal agencies to partner with organizations and increase programming.
- Ensure that efforts to fight homelessness **include veterans from diverse backgrounds**, which impacts veterans from diverse backgrounds at a higher rate than other veterans.
  - How: Have the DoD and VA change internal guidelines to ensure that all communities are covered in fighting homelessness.

### Native American Veterans

Although it is estimated that there are over 150,000 Native American veterans, our support for them often falls short. We need to change that so that people who have fought for our country receive the support they need.

- Increase the **number of tribal Veteran service officers and the VA services offered on tribal lands.**
  - How: This will be done internally at the VA by placing VA caregivers at Indian health centers. If the VA decided to increase the number of VA clinics at tribal reservations, this would require additional VA appropriations.
- Ensure that adequate funding exists for VA tribal home-loans.
  - How: This requires legislation
- Ensure that language being used by the DoD and VA is **culturally appropriate in references to Native Americans.**
  - How: Have the DoD and VA work with Native American representatives to ensure that their references are appropriate.

### Accomplishments

As Governor, Steve has prioritized veterans' wellbeing and worked with the legislature to ensure their service was honored.

#### **Honoring Those Who Serve:**

1. Opened opportunities for all Montanans who served in uniform to receive mental health counseling.
2. Allowed military families to be graveside during burials in the VA cemetery (2015).
3. Allowed disabled veterans to hunt as a part of rehab (2013).
4. Bill created a Medal of Valor that the state provides to soldier's next-of-kin (2013).
5. Bill provided a license plate for the next-of-kin who have lost a loved one in war (2013).
6. Raised the POW/MIA Flag Over the State Capitol in Remembrance for all Unaccounted and Missing Members of the American Armed Forces (April 4<sup>th</sup>)

#### **Giving Every Veteran a Fair Shot:**

1. Revising professional, occupational licensing terms regarding military training. Ensured that licenses and certifications received in the armed forces are carried over to the civilian sector. It cuts red tape and makes it easier for soldiers to get back into the workforce (2013).



2. Passed an apprenticeship tax credit to incentivize businesses to create more good-paying jobs and doubled that incentive for businesses to hire more Veterans (HB 308-2017).
3. Revising university system laws related to credit for military services. Allowed the commissioner of higher education to develop criteria for awarding academic credit at a postsecondary institution for a student's prior learning through military service (2013).
4. Invested in suicide prevention efforts for veterans, American Indians, and youth.
5. Revising commercial drivers' license laws related to military veterans. Allowed someone who was trained in the armed forces to carry that skill to the civilian sector, authorizing the Motor Vehicle Division within the Department of Justice to waive a skills test for veterans with military commercial motor vehicle experience (2013).
6. Revising Veteran Home Loan Program Laws. Invested money from the Coal Tax Trust Fund in the Montana veteran's home loan mortgage program, doubling the amount of money available to assist veterans who are first-time home buyers (2013).
7. Revised veteran public employment hiring laws. Guarantees that a veteran is granted an interview by a public employer if the veteran meets the required qualifications (2013).
8. Bill provided a \$1,000 scholarship to a soldier who receives a Purple Heart (2013).
9. Revise licensing laws regarding military service experience. This bill allowed military training and experience to satisfy licensing or certification requirements for the Department of Labor (2013).
10. Opened opportunities for all Montanans who served in uniform to receive mental health counseling.