



## Disabled Veterans and employers: moving from surviving to thriving

A Voya Cares study, in collaboration with Easterseals



PLAN  
INVEST  
PROTECT



# Table of Contents

---

<b>Executive summary</b> .....	1
<b>Key findings</b> .....	3
<b>Background: the changing face of America’s Veterans and caregivers</b> .....	4
<b>Research overview and methodology</b> .....	5
<b>Veterans with disabilities experience greater difficulties transitioning from military</b> .....	6
<b>Disabled Veterans lack confidence in short-term and long-term finances</b> .....	8
<b>Mental health concerns are top-of-mind</b> .....	12
<b>Disabled Veterans in the workplace: a disconnect between access and use</b> .....	14
<b>Caregivers serve an essential role, often without adequate support</b> .....	20
<b>Employers want to support disabled Veterans but need guidance</b> .....	24
<b>Where do employers go from here?</b> .....	28

# Executive summary

Employers have been eager to hire America’s Veterans in recognition of the unique expertise they can bring to an organization, as well as a show of support and patriotism. But with over one-third of Veterans nationwide reporting a disability, Voya Cares and Easterseals commissioned original research to better understand what it means to support Veterans with disabilities and their caregivers in the workplace.

The Veterans community today looks quite different than it did two decades ago. And service members from the post-9/11 generation returning to civilian life, often following multiple deployments, are returning to a different economy that demands new and constantly evolving skill sets.

On the surface, employers’ efforts to hire Veterans appear to have been successful: As of March 2024, the unemployment rate for all Veterans is 3.0%, and it is 5.3% for Veterans with a disability, lower than both groups’ non-Veteran counterparts.<sup>1</sup>

<b>Veteran unemployment rate:</b> 3.0%	<b>General population unemployment rate:</b> 3.8%
<b>Disabled Veteran unemployment rate:</b> 5.3%	<b>General disabled population unemployment rate:</b> 7.3%

However, these numbers do not show the full picture. For millions of American Veterans — particularly the over 4.7 million who have service-connected disabilities<sup>2</sup> — the transition from service to civilian life and work can present complexities and difficulties. It is not always apparent how skills developed in the military translate into the civilian workforce, even those that are highly valued by employers. Disabled Veterans may be employed, but many are underemployed, meaning they have a job, but it is part-time, and/or it does not allow them to use their skills and talents to their full potential. Mental and emotional health and wellbeing also are concerns for disabled Veterans, further complicating efforts to find and maintain employment that is appropriate to their level of skills and expertise.

Experiences like this have left many feeling uncertain about their long-term financial security and retirement. Add to that a lack of understanding of the financial resources available to them through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and their employers, and disabled Veteran employees are left unsure of how to maximize and integrate them all effectively.

The majority of respondents to a consumer insights survey in October 2022 think more can be done to help Veterans in the workplace:<sup>3</sup>

- 93% strongly or somewhat agree “it is important that Veterans are given a fair opportunity to be hired by corporations in America.”
- 88% strongly or somewhat agree “corporations could do more to help Veterans.”

Often overlooked in the conversation on important Veterans issues is the role of their families and caregivers. According to the VA, there are more than 6.5 million unpaid caregivers of Veterans.<sup>4</sup> These individuals perform the necessary and often unseen care tasks — including managing medication, health care, personal care, and transportation — that can impact not only the Veterans whom they support but also many areas of caregivers’ own lives. Caregivers often experience some of the same career challenges and financial insecurity that Veterans face but to a more extensive degree.

Today, many employers want to support their disabled Veteran employees and their Veteran caregiver employees. However, there is a gap between what support employees need, the benefits and services offered and those that are used.

With this in mind, Voya Cares and Easterseals commissioned original research to look beyond efforts to hire Veterans to better understand what it means to support Veterans with disabilities and their caregivers. Through surveys and in-depth interviews, the research explores key areas, such as:

- What challenges do Veterans with disabilities encounter when transitioning from service to civilian life and employment?
- What are disabled Veterans’ financial and career goals?
- Are they confident in their readiness for retirement?
- What benefits and supports are they seeking from employers?
- How are family caregivers being supported in the workplace?
- What role can employers play in providing Veterans with disabilities and their caregivers the support and services they need to thrive?

# Key findings

---

- **Disabled Veterans report challenges transitioning from service to civilian life and work. In particular, they face unique barriers to finding appropriate employment and advancing in their careers.**

Both Veterans with disabilities and employers face challenges connecting these Veterans with promising job opportunities. Many disabled Veterans report being underemployed. Additionally, disabled Veterans are more likely than nondisabled Veterans to feel they lack support for education and professional development opportunities. And employers have challenges around hiring disabled Veterans, including their tendency not to voluntarily disclose that they have a disability.

- **There is a significant gap between employers' perception of how they support disabled Veterans at work and how disabled Veterans and their caregivers feel their needs are being met in the workplace.**

Many employers see Veteran outreach as an essential part of their recruitment, but they are less focused on specific outreach efforts to Veterans with disabilities. Furthermore, employers are less certain about how to support disabled Veterans, once hired. While most employers are interested in offering benefits to support disabled Veterans and their caregivers — such as Stay-at-Work programs, managed accounts, and student debt management — the programs that disabled Veterans prioritize often differ from what employers expect.

- **Many Veterans with disabilities have low confidence about their long-term financial future and retirement.**

Even though many disabled Veterans access VA resources, they are not confident they are maximizing the benefits and resources available to them and integrating them effectively with their employee benefits. This is especially evident for retirement planning services, an area in which employers traditionally may not offer many benefits.

- **Concerns about mental health benefits and support are top-of-mind.**

Disabled Veterans recognize mental health as a top barrier to employment and indicate that mental health support and services are critical to their success at work. Yet even when employers make these supports available, disabled Veterans often are hesitant to access them, partly because they may not want to disclose mental health challenges.

- **Caregivers of disabled Veterans are struggling and frequently overlooked for support.**

Caregivers often perform a balancing act between work, caregiving and their own needs and would benefit from programs and resources that help them balance these demands.

# Background: the changing face of America's Veterans and caregivers

---

For the more than 16 million Veterans<sup>5</sup> in the United States, their adult lives are split into chapters — before joining the military, their time serving, and life after the military. And the transition from serving to post-service can be one of the most challenging shifts Veterans face — even more so for Veterans who leave the service with a disability.

Today's working Veterans represent the most diverse population ever to serve. Twenty years ago, the Veteran population was overwhelmingly male and predominately white. Now, as they separate from service, they are shifting the demographics of the overall Veteran population, with more women and more people of color having served.<sup>6</sup> The Veterans in the workforce today served during the Gulf War era and the Global War on Terror following Sept. 11, 2001.

Along with the increase in diversity that this new era has brought, there also is increased discussion and education about the importance of acknowledging any disability incurred during service, including mental health conditions. This has led to greater awareness of the ways that post-traumatic stress (PTS), traumatic brain injuries (TBI), insomnia, and other sleep issues can lead to mental health decline, including depression and anxiety. While stigma still exists around mental health, more Veterans are acknowledging they left service with this type of disability.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of the increased awareness and improved diagnostic criteria, post-9/11 and Gulf War Veterans have the largest percentage of reported disabilities compared to previous generations. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 39% of post-9/11 Veterans have a service-connected disability. In comparison, 37% of Gulf War Veterans, 26% of Vietnam Era Veterans, and 14% of World War II Veterans have service-connected disabilities. The post-9/11 generation not only has an increased number of reported disabilities compared to previous generations, they also are more likely to have a service-connected disability rating — based on the severity of their condition — of 50% or higher.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to service-connected disabilities, many Veterans, especially older Veterans, have what the U.S. Census calls an ACS-defined disability. This is a disability not related to service and includes difficulty with any of the following: hearing, vision, cognitive function, independent living, mobility, and/or self-care.<sup>8</sup>

With the increased number of Veterans with disabilities and the aging population of Veterans, the number of caregivers has increased and the care that they provide has evolved. Caregivers are often family members, neighbors, and/or friends who provide crucial, unpaid support to a Veteran with a disability. According to the VA, there are more 6.5 million unpaid caregivers.<sup>9</sup> These individuals perform the necessary and often unseen labor that can impact not only the Veterans they support, but other areas of their own lives, including their jobs and mental health.

# Research overview and methodology

With this changing Veteran population in the U.S. as a backdrop, Voya Cares®, in collaboration with Easterseals, commissioned Edge Research to conduct a national survey among disabled Veterans and nondisabled Veterans, caregivers of disabled Veterans and employers.<sup>10</sup>

Edge Research fielded the survey from December 2023–January 2024 among the following audiences:

## Veterans — Sample size of n=1029

- This includes n=728 Disabled Veterans and a comparison group of n=301 Nondisabled Veterans.
- Disabled Veterans include those who self-identify as having either a service-connected disability or a disability unrelated to service that limits one or more major life activities (or both).
- Survey participants are ages 18–75, and either in the workforce (part-time or full-time) or actively looking for employment.

## Caregivers of disabled Veterans — Sample size of n=305

- Caregivers of disabled Veterans include those who provide unpaid care to a family member with a disability who served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces. This may include helping with personal needs or household chores. It might be managing the disabled Veteran's finances, arranging for outside services, or visiting regularly to see how they are doing.
- Survey participants are ages 18–75 and either in the workforce (part-time or full-time) or looking for employment.

## Employers — Sample size of n=511

- Survey participants are decision-makers in the roles of hiring, benefits, retirement accounts, and/or health insurance with a title or role of supervisor or higher.
- They represent a mix of business sizes (with the number of employees being no less than 25) across key sectors.

To learn more about these audiences, 24 qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted virtually in January and February 2024. Interviews included eight representatives from each audience:

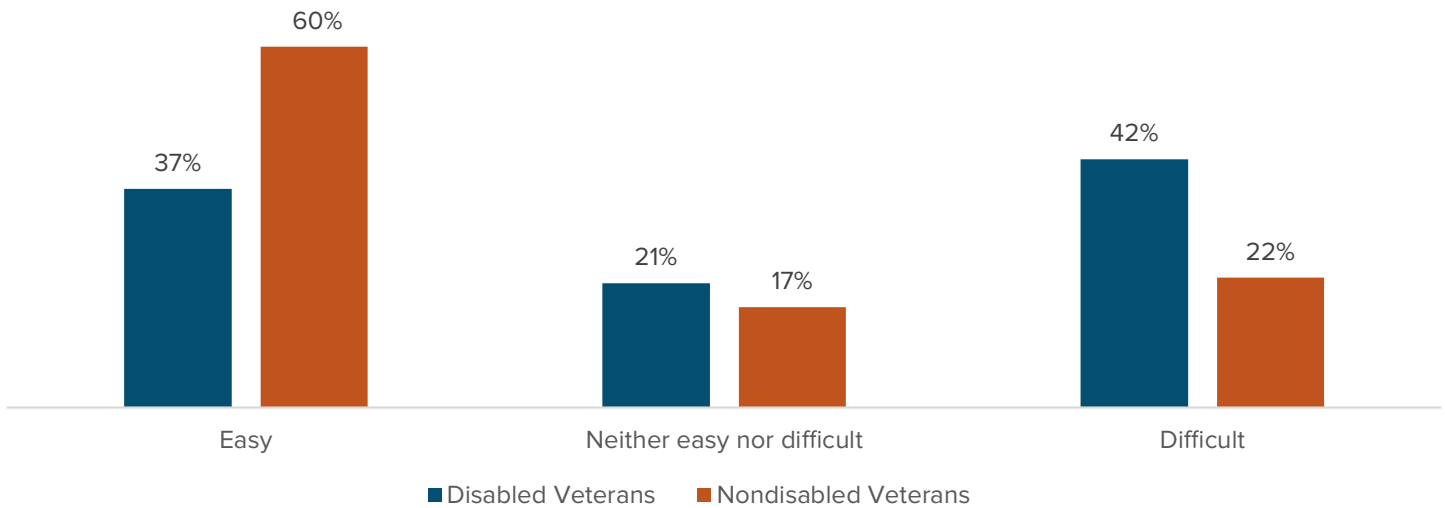
- Disabled Veterans.
- Caregivers who provide 10+ hours of care per week.
- Employers with at least 250 employees and that employ five or more Veterans with disabilities, at least some of whom were hired within the last five years.

Quotes throughout this report represent findings from these interviews.

# Veterans with disabilities experience greater difficulties and lack support when transitioning to civilian life and work

Based on this research, from the moment of separation from the military, Veterans with disabilities have a different experience than those without disabilities. As the chart below demonstrates, few disabled Veterans describe the transition to civilian work as “easy” (just 37%), compared to 60% of those without a disability who describe the transition as “easy”.

Transition to civilian work



The transition is especially difficult for those with mental health challenges from military service; only 31% says the transition to civilian work was easy.

One of the top employment barriers for Veterans with disabilities is understanding how military skills translate to the civilian workplace. This is a barrier for both employers and Veterans, as employers often do not know how to assess a Veteran’s work experience in the military and align their responsibilities to civilian work. This can be exacerbated by online application processes that rely on algorithms and Artificial Intelligence to determine applicants’ qualifications and eligibility.

## Disabled Veterans reported barriers to employment

Employers do not recognize how military skills translate to other jobs	29%
Competing with candidates who have been in the workforce longer	24%
Unsure how to translate military experience into civilian work opportunities	22%



At the same time, Veterans do not always know how to translate their military skills to civilian work; they may not understand which civilian roles and job descriptions match their own work experience. Veterans also are competing for positions with candidates who have more time in the civilian workforce, may be more familiar with the industry, and have a better understanding of how to navigate the application and interview process.

Even when they are able to secure employment, the quality or fit of the job may be lacking. Nearly a third (32%) of disabled Veterans consider themselves underemployed, meaning that they do not have enough paid work or are not doing work that makes full use of their skills and abilities. And while most (73%) of disabled Veterans on the surface say they are satisfied with their jobs, far fewer (57%) feel they have opportunities for professional growth and development.

In addition, just over half are satisfied with their mental and emotional health, and even fewer are satisfied with their financial health. And in almost every aspect, they are less satisfied than Veterans without disabilities by a significant margin, further underscoring the need to pay closer attention to this group that makes up more than a third of Veterans — 8.39 million Veterans spread across the workforce nationwide.<sup>11</sup>

### Social determinants of health % satisfied with each

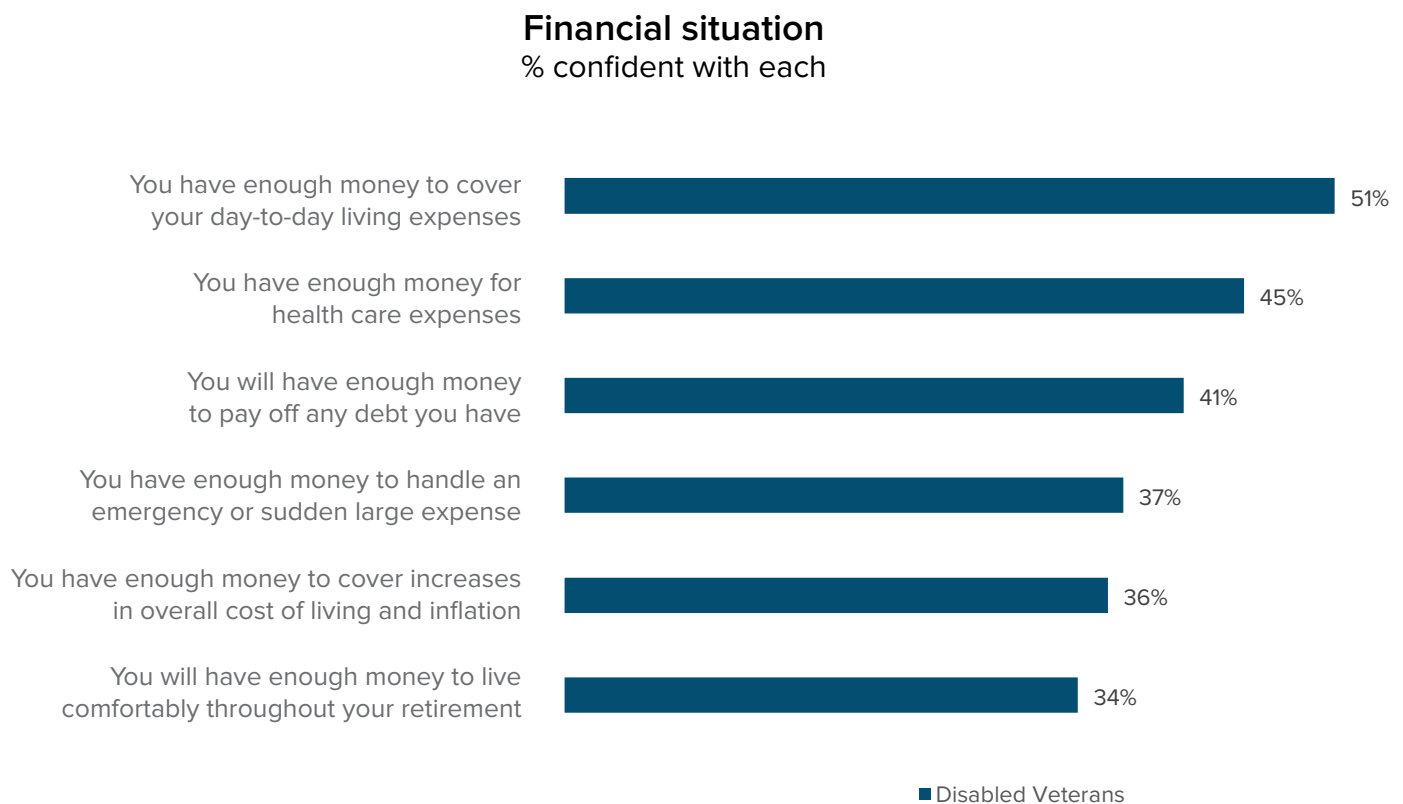


Despite this lower level of satisfaction, most Veterans with disabilities (93%) are accessing at least one VA benefit or service that may be able to impact their quality of life, most commonly health care (63%). Even though three-quarters access financial benefits from the VA (disability payments, housing/home loan assistance), fewer than half (43%) are confident that they are maximizing the VA benefits available to them as a disabled Veteran.

In general, few disabled Veterans access support for key areas where satisfaction is low: more than a quarter (29%) of disabled Veterans indicate that it was difficult to find financial health support, 27% found it difficult to access mental health support, and a third (32%) said it was difficult to find support for their disability.

# Disabled Veterans lack confidence in short-term and long-term finances

The lack of satisfaction and support around financial health is made even more evident when asked about their confidence in their financial situation. More than half (51%) of disabled Veterans feel confident in their ability to cover day-to-day expenses. From there, financial confidence notably drops off. Only about one-third are confident that they can handle an emergency, can keep up with the cost of living/inflation or will have enough money to live comfortably throughout retirement. Disabled Veterans also are significantly less confident that they can pay down debt, compared to nondisabled Veterans.



Looking more closely into disabled Veterans' current finances, it is easy to understand why they lack confidence in their financial situation:

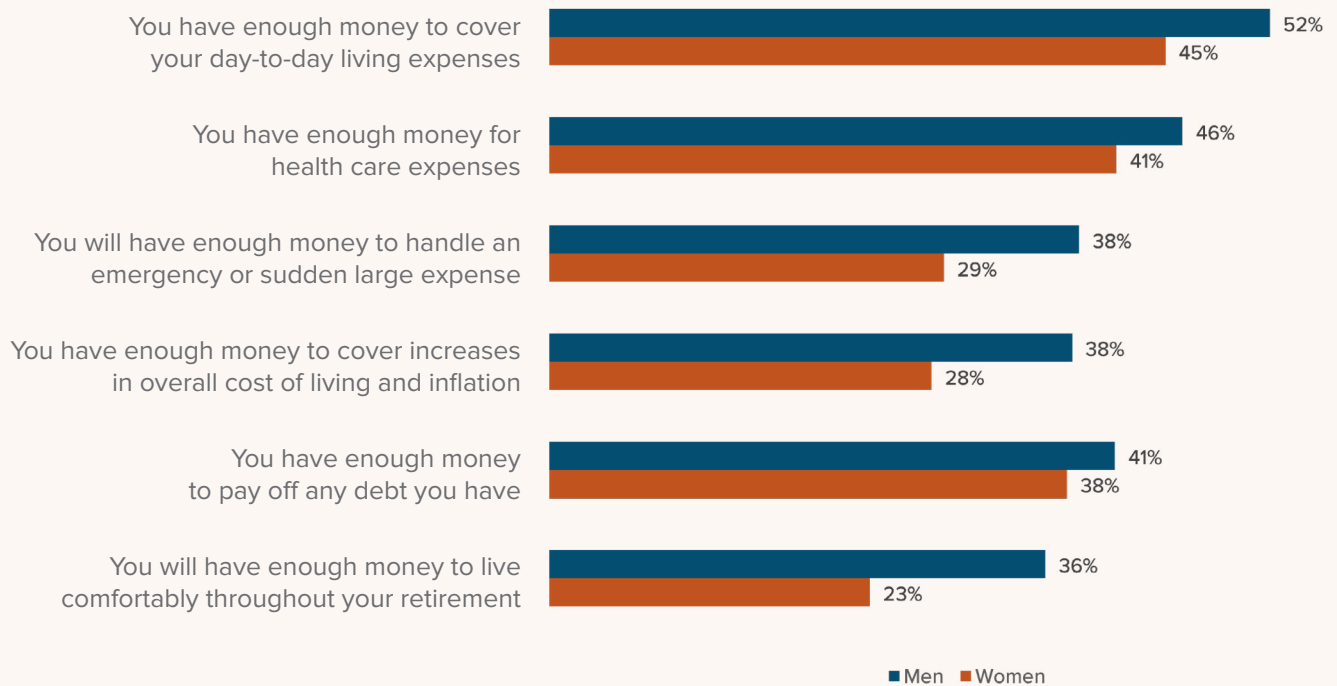
- 24% report having less than \$1,000 in savings and investments.
- 67% carry debt unrelated to mortgage or car loans.
- 68% say debt is a concern.

# Spotlight on disabled women Veterans

Disabled women Veterans are significantly less satisfied than their male counterparts in all areas, except physical health. Thirty-three percent (33%) of disabled women Veterans are dissatisfied with opportunities for professional growth and development, versus 17% of disabled male Veterans. For financial health, 39% of disabled women Veterans are dissatisfied, while 30% of disabled male Veterans say they are dissatisfied. In terms of confidence, disabled women Veterans are less confident than their male counterparts in all areas, and notably so around having enough money to live comfortably through retirement.

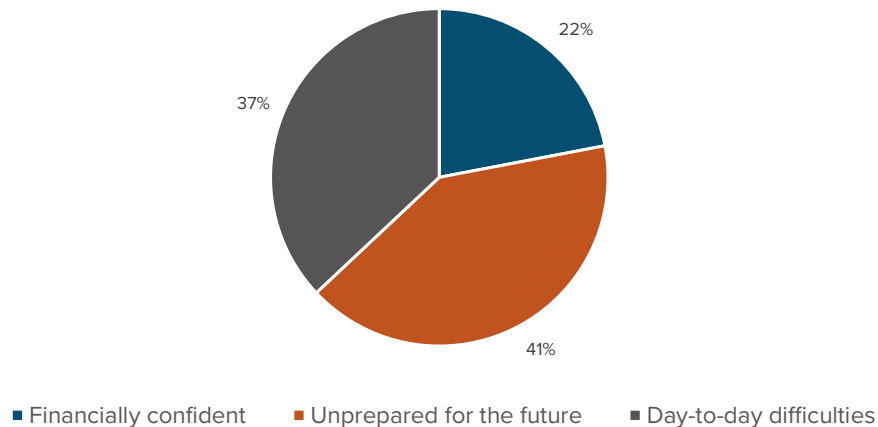
## Financial situation

% confident with each (by gender)



To better understand why and how some disabled Veterans struggle more financially than others, a statistical technique called “segmentation analysis” was used to look at unique groups of disabled Veterans based on their financial situation and outlook. More than a third fall into a group that faces “Day-to-day difficulties,” with lower incomes, more debt, and less built-in support.

### Disabled Veterans segments



## What are their characteristics?

Financially confident	Unprepared for the future	Day-to-day difficulties
<p>More likely to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be younger (nearly half are Gen Z/Millennial)</li> <li>• Be married</li> <li>• Be employed</li> <li>• Be unconcerned about debt</li> <li>• Have household income &gt;\$75,000</li> <li>• Have savings and investments averaging \$150,000</li> <li>• Be least likely to have both mental and physical injuries</li> </ul>	<p>More likely to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be more confident in covering day-to-day expenses</li> <li>• Be Gen X</li> <li>• Be married</li> <li>• Have served for more than 6 years</li> <li>• Be employed</li> <li>• Have debt</li> <li>• Have household income &gt;\$75,000</li> <li>• Have average savings and investments of \$85,000</li> </ul>	<p>More likely to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have low confidence in ability to cover day-to-day and any future expenses/retirement</li> <li>• Be women</li> <li>• Be Gen X</li> <li>• Be unmarried</li> <li>• Have served less than 6 years</li> <li>• Not have a caregiver/loved-one providing support</li> <li>• Have both physical and mental injuries from service</li> <li>• Be unemployed (24% currently is unemployed and looking for work)</li> <li>• Say debt is a major concern</li> <li>• Have household income &lt;\$75,000</li> <li>• Have average savings and investments of \$32,000</li> </ul>

In viewing all the financial planning and products that disabled Veterans currently use, the vast majority of those surveyed — 82% — say they have done some retirement planning. However, only half of those surveyed have a retirement plan vehicle, such as an IRA, 401(k) or similar, perhaps due to the financial strain they are experiencing covering day-to-day needs and paying down debt. This is remarkable considering that 64% of those surveyed are either Gen X or Boomers (44 years or older). Very few access professional services that assist in planning for retirement: only 18% have retirement planning services, and fewer (14%) have a financial advisor.

Nearly half of disabled Veterans surveyed (46%) are planning to work to support themselves in retirement — the most frequently cited source of retirement income for the survey — followed by Social Security benefits at 44%. Forty-one percent (41%) of disabled Veterans will rely on VA disability payments to support their retirement. Fewer are planning to rely on what they can save or invest before retirement.

Veterans with disabilities may be thinking about retirement and savings, but they currently are not accessing the expertise and tools that could help them plan.

I feel okay if something was to happen; I could probably take care of things for three months. But then what happens beyond that? Within the military, we were able to build that huge nest egg for yourself to where you could get through six months or a year of taking care of expenses and whatnot, but I just don't feel that now. I feel like I had to start from the bottom, and I'm slowly working myself back up all over again.... I would say I'm behind [on saving for retirement], because I'm nowhere near the salary that I was making in the military as an officer. I'm nowhere near that amount of money a month. And so, until I can get to that point on the civilian side of the house, I don't really feel that I can retire."

— Disabled Veteran

# Mental health concerns are top-of-mind

Mental and emotional health and wellbeing are concerns for disabled Veterans, both generally and in the workplace. As indicated earlier, the post-9/11 cohort are more aware of and willing to acknowledge mental and emotional injuries than previous generations.

Despite the advancements made in the national conversation around mental health, stigmas persist: Veterans with only mental health disabilities are less likely to disclose (56% disclose their disability) to an employer than those with only physical disabilities (64% disclose). And Veterans with all types of disabilities often fear workplace discrimination, worried that they will not get hired, or if hired, will be treated differently.

Veterans are especially concerned about the public perceptions around PTS. A lack of understanding among the general population of how it presents, mixed with popular media depictions of violent Veterans, makes many disabled Veterans wary of sharing this diagnosis with others, including employers.

Mental and emotional health challenges are the most common barriers that disabled Veterans face when it comes to finding employment or better employment, but employer awareness, understanding and support have a big role to play.

- 31% of disabled Veterans cite mental or emotional health challenges as a barrier to finding work/better work.
- 49% of disabled Veterans surveyed have both mental and physical injuries.
- Another 24% have only mental injuries.

Importantly, a common attitude among Veterans — disabled and nondisabled — can further complicate their getting the resources and support they may need. Many Veterans do not want to access a benefit that they think other Veterans may need more than they do. This applies to accessing VA benefits and services, as well as employer benefits, so they avoid using them themselves. This attitude could be one explanation behind the finding that only 60% of those who have mental health disabilities and have mental health supports offered by employers actually use those benefits.

I dropped the psychiatrist and went on the outside. I did this for one, I think, good reason. I don't want to take up a slot that somebody else may really need. I don't want to take an appointment from somebody who may really need it ... so I will not use the VA services. I'm not going to be greedy. I'm not going to take away services that somebody could use instead."

— Disabled Veteran

On employers' part, they tend to struggle with accommodating Veterans with the signature disabilities of PTS, traumatic brain injury, depression, and anxiety. A quarter (25%) of employers surveyed cite mental or emotional health as challenges in hiring disabled Veterans, and 23% of employers say that disabled Veterans do not want to ask for the accommodations that they need. This aligns with what disabled Veterans are saying; privacy concerns, fear of backlash, and concern for their fellow Veterans are the main reasons many disabled Veterans do not want to disclose to employers or ask for accommodations. Ironically, not disclosing can lead to employers being less likely to offer the supports from which disabled Veterans would benefit. Fewer than two-thirds of employers surveyed (62%) indicate they offer mental health support to employees.

“How much do I want my employer to know? I have a disability. I’m bipolar. I take medication for depression, so if I come to you asking for help with something, that, one, you really don’t need to know because if I mess up, I don’t want you to automatically assume it’s because of [being bipolar]. So, me having to go through [my employer] to get assistance with something I’m not comfortable sharing.... My employer doesn’t need to know everything about me. All you need to be concerned about is whether or not I can do the job. Now, if I can’t do the job, then it’s still up in my parameters with how much I want to share with you, because I’ve seen on Reddit and other places where people get this type of information, and they run them up with it.”

— Disabled Veteran

# Disabled Veterans in the workplace: a disconnect between access and use

---

Given the gaps in awareness and access to resources and services that would be most helpful to disabled Veterans, there are a number of opportunities for employers, including collaborations with community nonprofits to provide benefits and services through the workplace.

Just over half of disabled Veterans say their employer is very supportive of Veterans generally (53% say very supportive), but fewer say their employer is very supportive of Veterans with disabilities (45%), or employees with disabilities generally (43%). While almost all (95%) have disclosed they are a Veteran, a third (33%) have not disclosed they have a disability. This points to a need for employers to better support these employees.

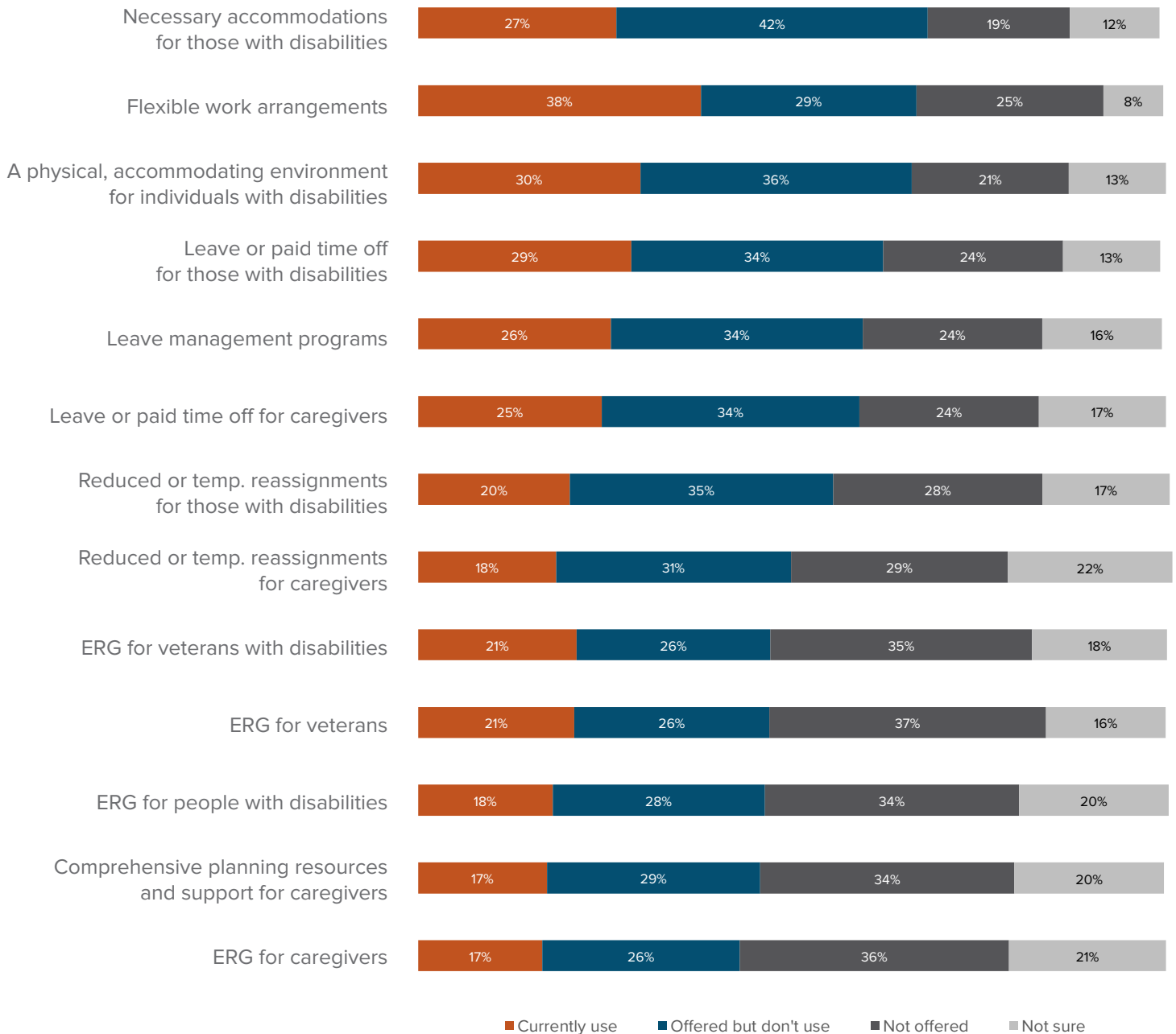
Regarding general support from employers or colleagues, Veterans with disabilities have varying experiences. Overall, Veterans feel that employers can better meet their needs in several areas, including educational/professional developmental benefits. As noted in the social determinants of health graph, on page 7, only 57% of disabled Veterans are satisfied with opportunities for professional growth and development (just 19% are very satisfied), and 32% consider themselves underemployed.

## **Workplace benefits and services**

When looking broadly at employer benefits, there are two distinct issues: access (what an employer offers) and use (what an employee uses). There are clear gaps between what Veterans say their employers offer and what disabled Veterans are actually using.



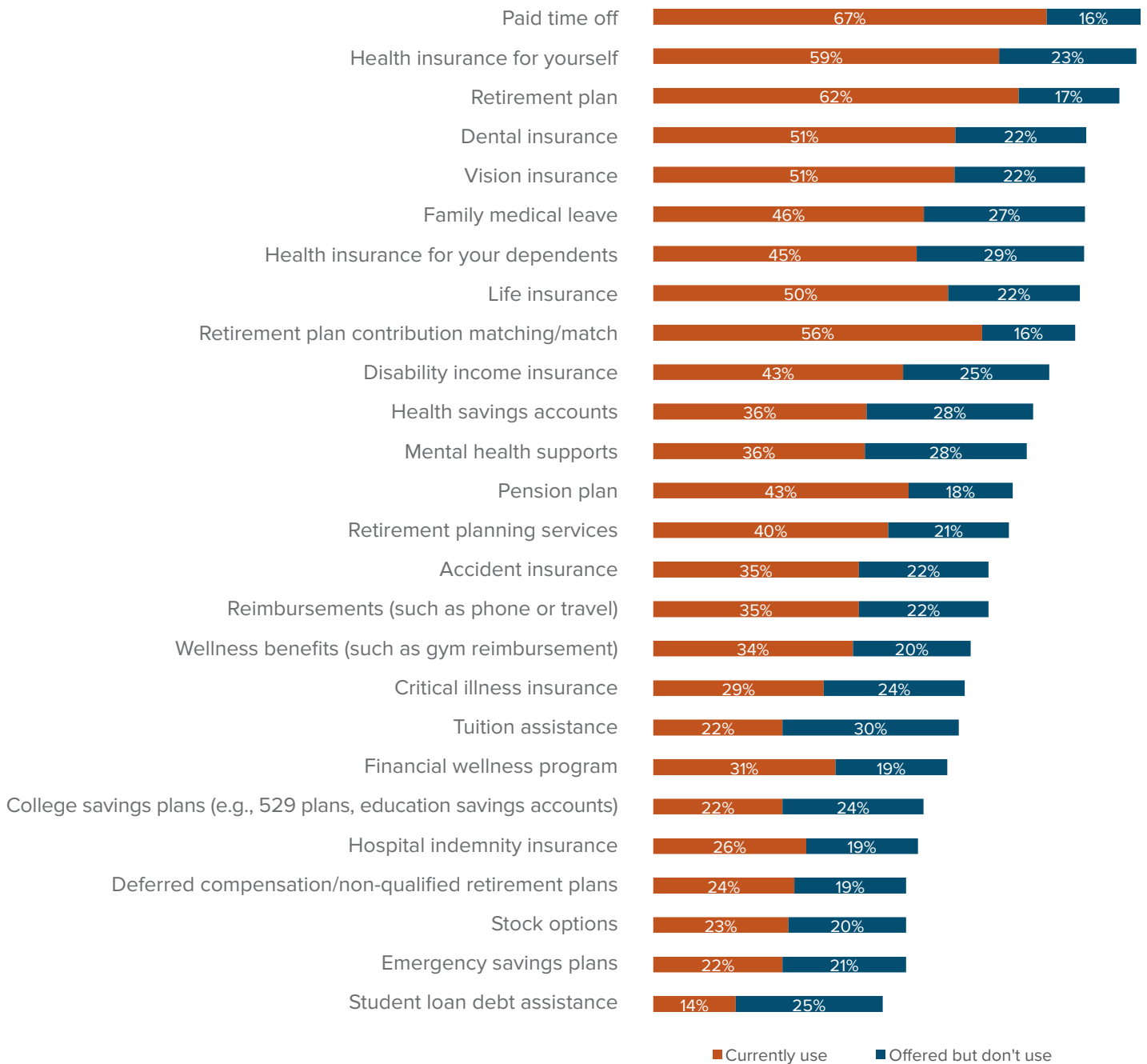
## Programs offered by employer



While 68% of respondents said their employer offers necessary accommodations for those with disabilities, only 27% report using those accommodations. While some employer programs may not be as prevalent as disabled Veterans would like, many are not taking advantage of existing programs that may benefit them.

A slightly different question asked respondents what benefits their employer offered and if they use those benefits.

### Benefits offered by employer



This issue of access versus use is another area where there is a clear disconnect. For products specifically geared towards retirement, the delta between those “offered” and “used” percentages is concerning. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of employers (according to employees) offer a retirement plan, yet only 62% use it. Use of retirement plan contribution matching is even lower, with only 56% taking advantage (72% have access to that benefit), and just 40% of disabled Veteran employees use retirement planning services through their employer (61% have access to them).

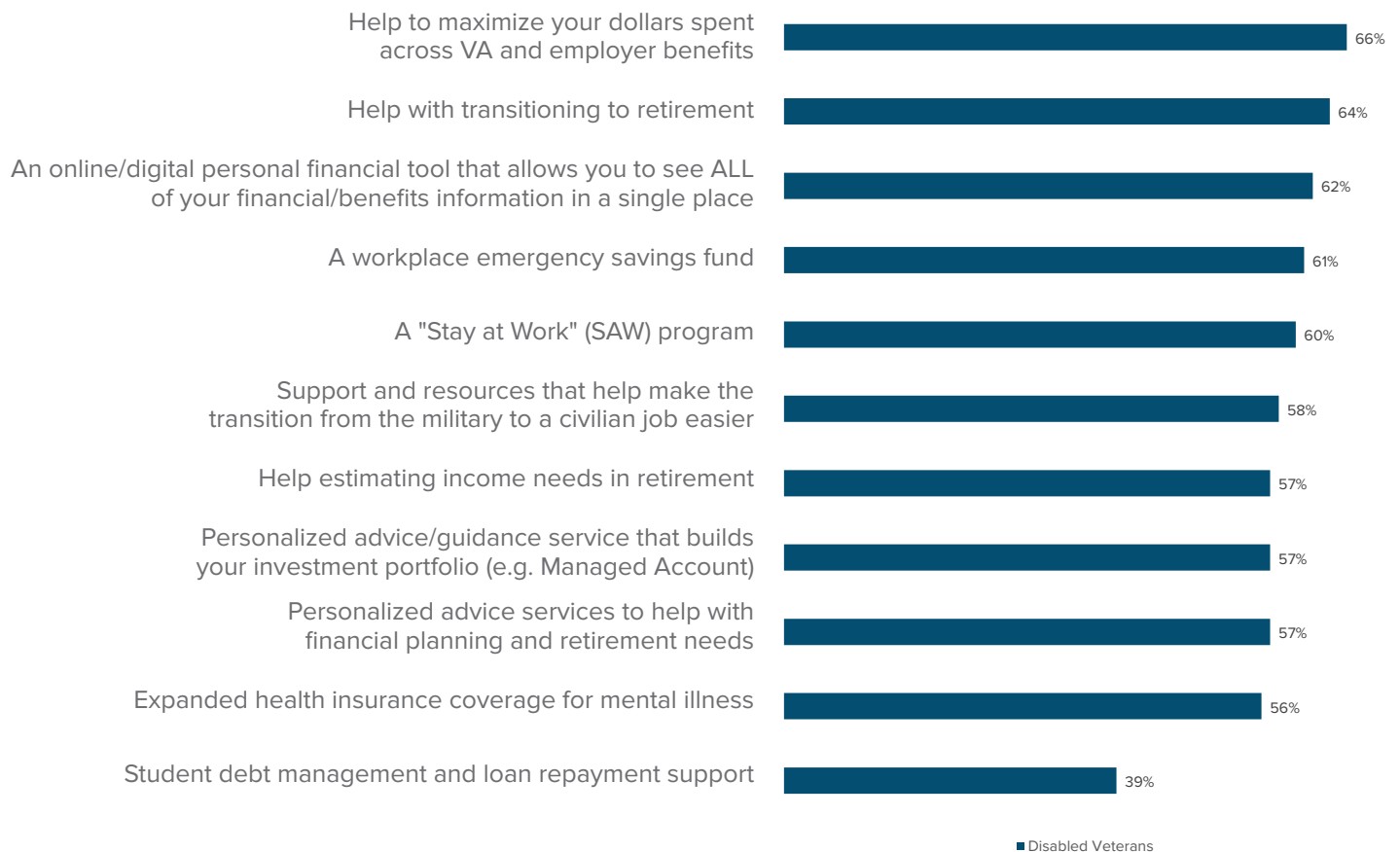
Beyond the more traditional employee benefits, such as paid time off (PTO) and health insurance for themselves, use of other benefits is below 50%. When analyzing the responses of the three segments of disabled Veterans identified earlier, those who are “financially confident” are significantly more likely to have access to each of the programs and benefits shown in the graphs on pages 15 and 16 — both traditional benefits as well as accommodations and employee resource groups (ERG) — and are significantly more likely to take advantage of them when they are available. Those who experience “Day-to-day difficulties” are least likely to have access to each of these benefits through work and less likely to use them when they are available to them.

In interviews with this latter segment, participants explained that benefits information was limited — often shared when they first started or only in group meetings where it is not easy to ask questions about personal circumstances. Several expressed interest in one-on-one third-party guidance to help them make choices and explore benefits based on their personal needs and financial circumstances, without worrying about bias from their employers.

### Beyond the basic benefits

Beyond currently offered benefits, the study asked disabled Veterans and employers about benefits, programs and services selected with disabled Veterans’ needs in mind. Veterans were asked how helpful each would be to them personally.

### Potential support programs from employers % who think helpful



The most desired benefit indicated by disabled Veterans is assistance in maximizing VA and employer benefits, with 66% saying this would be helpful. As noted earlier, fewer than half of disabled Veterans are confident they are maximizing the VA benefits that are available to them, and the VA benefit system can be confusing even to the most knowledgeable Veteran. With eligibility for many benefits based on several different factors, including length of service, when the service occurred (Vietnam era, peacetime, post-9/11, etc.) and other requirements, it can be confusing to navigate what a Veteran is eligible for, when, and for how long.

Just looking online ... I've just been calling the VA line, which is frustrating, because they're not the most helpful, and you know, we're trying to figure this out, and the answers that they give you are just like, "Oh, you can go to our website and look for this," or it just kind of felt like I was getting the runaround. So, I would just call other service members, and they would tell me you're entitled to these things. Like I didn't realize I was entitled, because of my disability, that I could get an exemption for taxes on my home. I did not know that, and it was just a service member who told me. I felt that should have been part of the transitioning process. Just a service member told me, and I went up to the tax office, and I was like, "Hey, I'm a Veteran; I have a disability, so what paperwork do I need?" and then they gave it to me."

— Disabled Veteran

There are several areas around finances about which disabled Veterans are particularly interested, including assistance with transitioning to retirement — understanding the myriad benefits they may be eligible for including Social Security, military retirement, retirement plans and more (64% said this would be helpful). An online/digital personal financial tool that allows employees to see all of their financial and employer benefits information in a single place is also of real interest (62% said this would be helpful).

In addition, slightly more than six-in-ten (61%) disabled Veterans are interested in emergency workplace savings funds and "Stay at Work" programs that offer them a financial safety net in emergencies or times of difficulty. These benefits can help with some of the financial insecurities described previously and expressed in the in-depth interviews.

More than half of disabled Veterans (56%) indicate that expanded coverage for mental health would be helpful — and this ranks particularly high for those who experience “Day-to-day difficulties.” In the interviews, some disabled Veterans expressed confidentiality concerns in using employer benefits for mental health, so interest could be higher if properly structured. Since mental health is the top barrier faced by disabled Veterans in seeking any or better employment, it is clear that adequate — and transparently confidential — mental health care is key to disabled Veterans’ success in the workforce.

Disabled Veterans also were asked about various support options that nonprofit Veterans services organizations (VSO) could offer in partnership with employers. About two-thirds (67%) said a Veterans’ staffing network would be helpful, and 63% said support and resources that help make the transition from military to civilian work easier would be helpful, too. This points to a role for nonprofit collaborations to help employers better support disabled Veterans in the workforce.

# Caregivers serve an essential role, often without adequate support

Like many caregivers, individuals who care for Veterans with disabilities can sometimes feel like a forgotten group, despite serving in an essential, often life-sustaining role. Although they share similar concerns as the disabled Veterans for whom they care, they experience elevated levels of concern.

## Caregiver profile

### Demographics:

- 62% are women.
- 58% support their disabled Veteran financially.
- 52% are caring for a parent or parent-in-law.
- 21% care for a spouse.
- 85% are caring for someone with a service-connected disability.

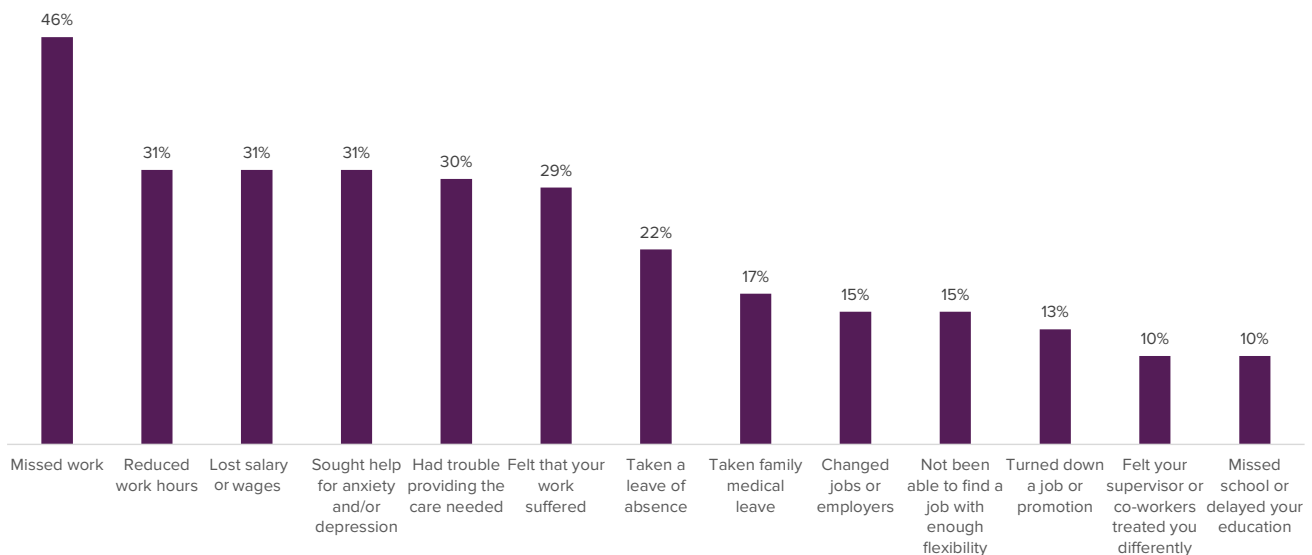
### Financial situation:

- 21% report confidence in having enough money to live comfortably through retirement.
- 62% report having less than \$50K in retirement savings.
- 58% have a household income under \$75k.
- 80% have non-mortgage, non-auto debt.
- 30% report feeling under-employed.
- 47% plan to work full-time or part-time to support themselves in retirement.

Caregivers often provide support in many different areas, including 58% who report financially supporting their Veteran. Most have had to make sacrifices at work; 86% of caregivers report that caregiving has impacted their work or education in some way.

## Challenges experienced at work

% of caregivers who experienced each



Caregivers often perform a balancing act — providing support at home, going to work, and trying to find time for their own well-being. It is no surprise, then, that when it comes to accessing support, caregivers report facing the biggest challenges in finding and using resources not only for their Veterans' disabilities (only 30% report it is easy to find support) but also for their own financial (only 36% report it is easy) and mental and emotional health (only 43% report it is easy).

As a result, caregivers unsurprisingly report that jobs offering flexibility and better accommodations for their caregiving role have the most appeal.

Being at the top of your career and thinking you've got everything under control and everything's going in the right direction and just to have it do a complete 180. I stepped down from a higher position at my job and took two steps down to a job with less pay and being able to have the option to work from home on the days that I need to work from home, but I'm with the same company. The position that I was in was very demanding with a lot of travel, a lot of being away from home, and when I took a lesser paid position and a more accommodating position to be able to accommodate for when I needed to be home ... I would have to take a pay decrease to go down that level to where I was at, but I would have the opportunity to be able to be more flexible with my job and to work from home."

— Caregiver of a disabled Veteran

While finding flexible positions is key, some caregivers are hesitant to disclose their role to their employer — about a third (30%) say they have not told their employer that they are caregivers of disabled Veterans.

To be honest with you, I don't think that I've ever really laid my cards on the table with my employer about it. I think I've always been hesitant, because I don't want them to try to use [it] as a way to handicap me. I don't want them to try to say, if there's a good opportunity, "Oh, we can't count on her because she has to care for her father," or something like that. So, I've never been totally transparent with them about it."

— Caregiver of a disabled Veteran

Caregivers, much like disabled Veterans, emphasize wanting additional support in key areas to improve their overall wellness and financial health. One of the top-ranking areas in which caregivers want support is maximizing both employer and VA benefits — for themselves and their loved one who is a Veteran.

### Potential support programs from employers % of caregivers who think helpful

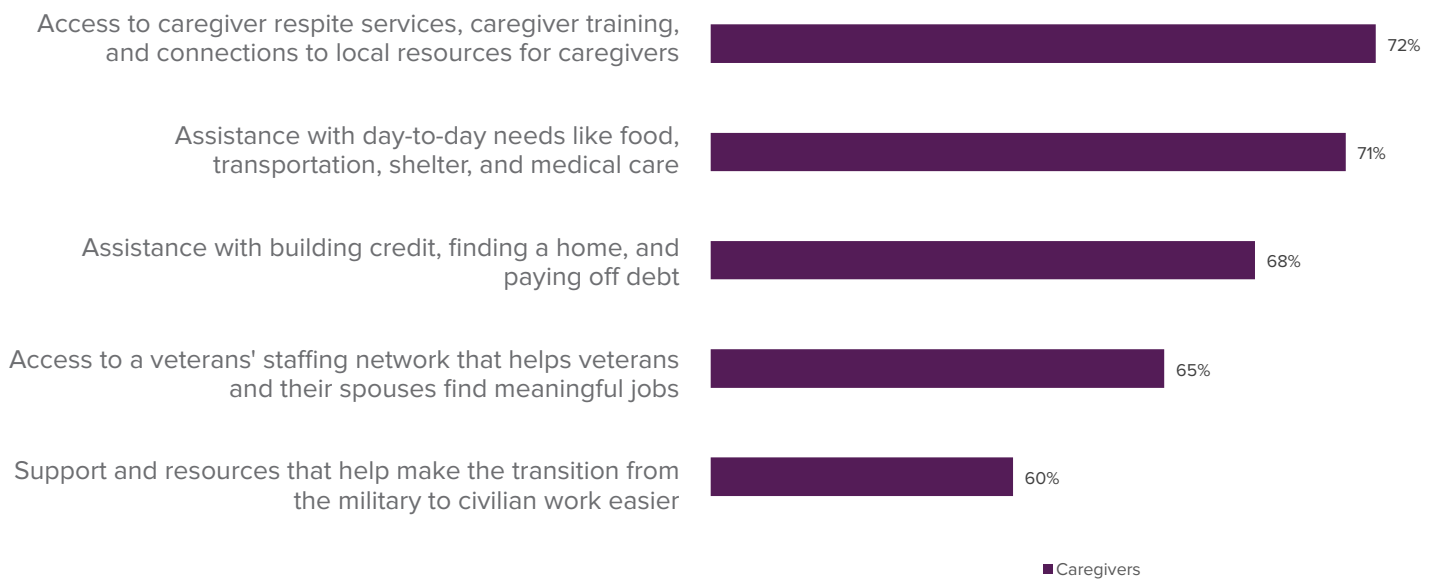
Expanded coverage for caregivers who are in the hospital and need to provide continuity of care to a family member	69%
Help to maximize your dollars spent across VA and employer benefits	68%
Comprehensive planning resources and support for caregivers	66%
Help with transitioning to retirement	65%
A workplace emergency savings fund	65%
Expanded health insurance coverage for mental illness	64%
A "Stay at Work" (SAW) program	63%
Help estimating income needs in retirement	63%
An online/digital personal financial tool that allows you to see ALL of your financial and employer benefits information in a single place	61%
Personalized advice/guidance service that builds your investment portfolio	60%
Personalized advice services to help with financial planning and retirement needs	57%
Student debt management and loan repayment support	48%



Because caregivers often balance many different roles, the programs that have the most appeal to them tend to be those that offer more immediate support and relief. As seen in the data above, making sure they have coverage for their caregiving responsibilities when experiencing their own emergencies is paramount as an employer-provided benefit.

There are a number of opportunities for employers to support their caregiving employees both directly and indirectly through community and nonprofit organizations. When asked about support that nonprofit organizations might be able to offer, day-to-day needs like caregiver respite services and support for food, transportation, shelter, and medical care each were rated as extremely or pretty helpful by more than 70% of caregivers.

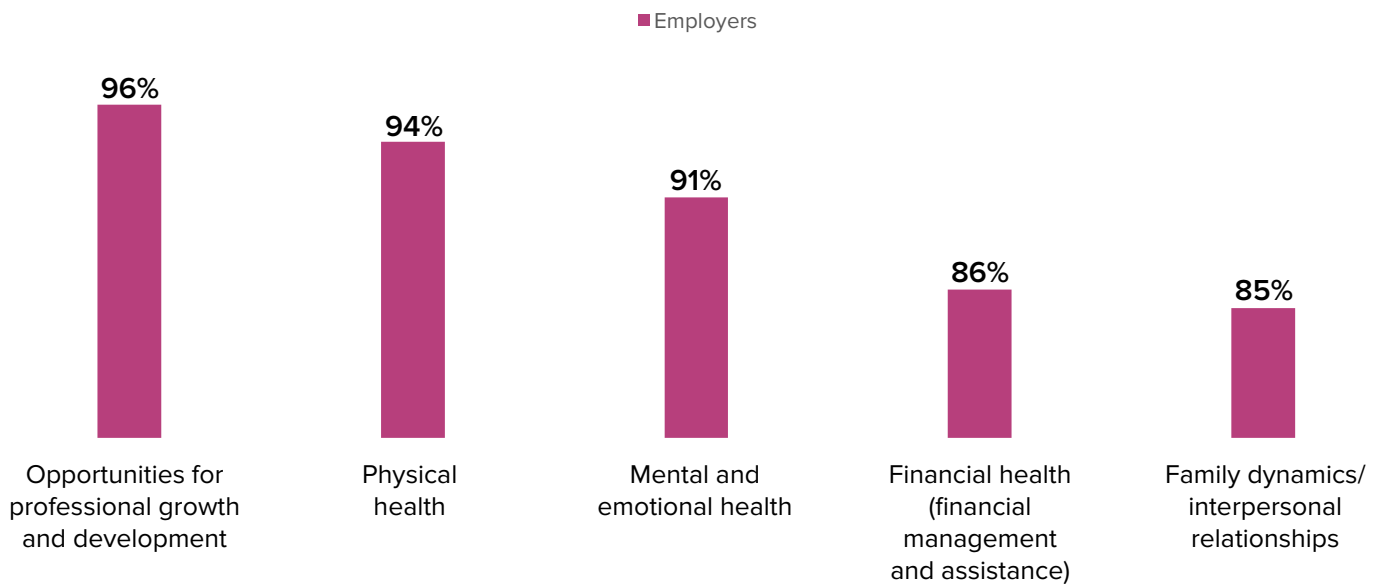
### Nonprofit support programs % of caregivers who say would be helpful



# Employers want to support disabled Veterans but need guidance

Employers have a very different view of how they are supporting disabled Veteran employees. Employers see themselves as highly supportive, including professional opportunities and financial health — two areas in which disabled Veterans feel they lack support.

## Employer support of disabled Veterans % who say support is offered



This perception is consistent across business size, with small, medium, and large organizations responding that they are supportive of employees who are Veterans with disabilities.

Employers overall are interested in hiring Veterans because of the characteristics that military service attracts or helps develop: discipline, focus, and being team players. But there is more that employers can do to meet the needs of this audience and their caregivers, as described in the previous sections of this report.

More than two-thirds (67%) of employers have DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) efforts in their hiring and retention, and among those that do, 80% include Veterans in that effort, while only 67% include Veterans with disabilities, and only 48% include caregivers of any kind. In terms of active recruitment, only 35% of all employers focus on Veterans with disabilities for hiring.

As noted previously, disabled Veterans are overwhelmingly likely to disclose to their employers that they are a Veteran, but only two-thirds (65%) of disabled Veterans disclose their disability to employers, and just over half (56%) of Veterans with only a mental health disability are likely to disclose to their employer. They often fear discrimination — either that they will not be hired or will be treated differently once hired. Some employers have seen these fears realized in their own workplaces.

[Asking for accommodations] is tricky because you're gonna get that conscious or unconscious bias, right? If there's somebody who is asking for that, this is where I think, how do you prevent a leader from showing bias, right? Not wanting this employee because they are asking for that accommodation .... No one will ever admit to it being unsafe, but I will tell you from my experience that you can do a lot of things to hurt your brand, and one of them is to have asterisks. Like that's kind of the reality of the corporate world. You can't be high maintenance. And if a Veteran says, "oh, I have a lot of PTSD," somebody will consciously or unconsciously have a bias."

— Employer

This common recognition of the possibility of bias presents an opportunity for employers and Veterans with disabilities to have more meaningful conversations with each other. Employers can create an environment that is conducive to disclosure for disabled Veterans, helping in turn to build trust and awareness among all employees.

Employers were asked about the same benefits tested among Veterans and caregivers, and there is strong alignment between what Veterans and caregivers see as helpful and what employers are interested in providing.

Support programs from employers	% of employers		% of disabled Veterans say benefit is helpful	% of caregivers say benefit is helpful
	currently offer	interested in offering		
Help maximizing dollars spent across benefits offered by the VA and employer	24%	60%	66%	68%
Support and resources for transition from the military to a civilian job	23%	63%	58%	n/a
Expanded health insurance coverage for mental illness	23%	62%	56%	64%
Help with the transition to retirement	23%	61%	64%	65%
Providing an online/digital personal financial tool	21%	64%	62%	61%
Comprehensive planning resources and support for caregivers	21%	61%	n/a	66%
A "Stay-at-Work" (SAW) program	19%	64%	60%	63%
Personalized advice services to help with financial planning and retirement needs	19%	63%	57%	57%
Personalized service that builds an investment portfolio (e.g., Managed account)	19%	63%	57%	60%
Help estimating income needs in retirement	19%	62%	57%	63%
Expanded coverage for caregivers who are in the hospital	18%	64%	n/a	69%
A workplace emergency savings plan	16%	66%	61%	65%
Student debt management and loan repayment support	15%	58%	39%	48%

As noted before, the top desired support for disabled Veterans is help maximizing their benefits. Employers also show strong interest in offering this benefit; however, only a quarter of employers say they offer any help with this need now, and interviews indicate that a benefit to help disabled Veterans maximize benefits may be limited to a general Employee Assistance Program (EAP). While interest among employers is high, this area is one where the employers interviewed said they would need additional expertise beyond what they have on staff. They see a clear role for third parties like nonprofits, including VSOs, to support employer efforts in this area. However, few interviewed have turned to those nonprofit organizations for guidance, and there seems to be little awareness that these organizations exist.

I know we work with nonprofits for community building and all of that, but not where they're supporting our employees to my knowledge. I love the idea of it. I don't think there's any way we could do that on our own. I think what would make sense would be [a nonprofit collaborator] helping or putting together programming around that financial planning and personalized service, standing that up. So maybe creating some resources that are more self-serve just like, "Hey, this is what we offer." And then maybe standing it up so they're the ones getting the inquiries about, "Well, how do I do this?" Or, "How can you guide me?" So, yeah, I would expect just kind of some expertise on that financial planning piece, the navigation of those VA benefits. I think probably separately ... recommendations on how we could better support the military community on mental health and especially those with disability."

— Employer

Notably, while there is strong interest in these support programs from employers — including both financial benefits and expanded coverage for mental health — few are currently offering any of them. There is a great deal of opportunity for employers to better demonstrate their commitment to supporting disabled Veterans, and partnership with experts will be essential.

# Where do employers go from here?

---

Veterans with disabilities and their caregivers are looking for support in the important areas discussed above in their lives: transitioning out of the military, financial planning and mental health. This study highlights a number of critical actions employers may consider taking if they are committed to easing the transition from military to civilian life and work and making a meaningful difference in the lives of disabled Veterans and their caregivers.

- **Recognize that, when hiring Veterans, there is a possibility that Veterans with disabilities are being hired — and the appropriate support may be provided.**

More than a third of Veterans are leaving service with a disability, and these Veterans report having a harder time making the transition to civilian life and work than those without disabilities. Disabled Veterans may face additional challenges that employers should be conscious of, especially as they transition. Employers should be prepared to allow sufficient time and effort onboarding Veterans with disabilities and ongoing support to ensure their success. Consider building a welcoming and supportive culture for disabled Veterans through ongoing employee education and awareness building about the traditions and values of this employee group, standing up a Veterans ERG to provide camaraderie and peer support, as well as a mentoring program to help disabled Veteran employees acclimate to the corporate culture.

- **Consider the needs of disabled Veteran employees in the design of a benefits package.**

Again, Veterans with disabilities have unique needs, and those needs should be reflected in the benefits package offered. For example, a majority expressed interest in assistance and tools to help coordinate employee benefits and VA benefits. Based on the findings that many disabled Veterans are not necessarily accessing the variety of financial benefits from the VA, employer benefit offerings of group life insurance — preferably guaranteed issue — and short- and long-term disability coverage may help to fill a gap in their financial planning. Highlighting another financial need, more than 80% of disabled Veterans fall into segments that are not financially prepared for emergencies, so emergency savings plans may offer a lifeline in emergencies. Preparing for retirement also is a key need. Offering auto enrollment into a retirement plan like a 401(k) with a matching contribution can help bridge the gap in retirement savings, while Health Savings Accounts (for high deductible medical plans) and Flexible Spending Accounts can help to cover unpredictable medical costs both in the short term and in retirement.

- **Provide ample education around mental health care and coverage. Although many employer-provided health insurance plans have robust coverage, these audiences may not know it.**  
Be sure that information regarding the coverage is plentiful and easy to access. Beyond the coverage in the employer-sponsored health plan, consider offering free sessions through a general EAP, and make the sessions available for the employee's family members, as well. Lastly, all employees should be regularly reminded of the benefits available to them to increase opportunities to take advantage of existing programs.
  
- **Be proactive in creating a culture that is safe and inclusive for disabled Veterans (and their caregivers) to disclose their situations and their needs.**  
Fear of bias is one reason disabled Veteran employees and caregivers currently may not disclose their disability or role as caregivers and take advantage of existing programs and benefits. By promoting the benefits of self-identification and how to access accommodations, both employers and their disabled Veteran employees may benefit. Employers may seek to create opportunities for disabled Veterans and their caregivers to have confidential conversations about employer benefits or with VSO partners who could offer support. In addition, employers should consider offering training to both managers and employees to reduce bias and stigma around disabilities — especially mental health.
  
- **Look to the VA and VSOs to help support these employees and further their personal and professional success.**  
The VA offers a number of benefits and programs, but navigating these options and VA systems can be confusing and time-consuming. Consider offering support through a health care concierge benefit that provides guidance, coaching, resources, and emotional support. Ultimately, employers should think critically about what kinds of support they can offer directly and those they cannot. For those they cannot offer, partnering with community VSOs when needed can help Veterans and their caregivers maximize the benefits and services available to them through the VA.
  
- **Don't forget about caregivers.**  
This audience often is forced to sacrifice professional growth for opportunities that offer more flexibility. Employers may look for ways to support caregiver employees through flexible hours, remote work options and concierge caregiving solutions that help them manage the day-to-day demands of their caregiving. Benefits of this type not only can help caregiver employees stay better engaged in their jobs, but also may keep them at their jobs long term.

# Endnotes

- 1 March 8, 2024, Veteran Unemployment Rates, U.S. Department of Labor, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/latest-numbers>
- 2 U.S. Census Bureau data tables 2022, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT1Y2022.B21100?t=Disability:Veterans>
- 3 Based on the results of a Voya Financial Consumer Insights & Research survey conducted October 2-3, 2022, among 1,005 adults aged 18+ in the U.S.
- 4 “Caregivers of Veterans Spend \$11,500 on Average Each Year on Expenses, New Data Shows.” Military.com, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2023/11/14/caregivers-of-veterans-spend-11500-average-each-year-expenses-new-data-shows.html#:~:text=More%20than%206.5%20million%20veterans,offers%20extensive%20services%20for%20caregivers> and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Health Research, Caregivers and Family Support, [https://www.hsrdr.research.va.gov/research\\_topics/caregiving.cfm](https://www.hsrdr.research.va.gov/research_topics/caregiving.cfm)
- 5 U.S. Census Bureau data tables 2022, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT1Y2022.B21100?t=Disability:Veterans>.
- 6 "Wounded Warrior Project: Annual Warrior Survey 2022," <https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/media/ylwhpx4h/wwp-2022-annual-warrior-survey-full-report.pdf>
- 7 “Those Who Served: America’s Veterans from World War II to the War on Terror.” U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2020/demo/acs-43.html>
- 8 “Those Who Served: America’s Veterans from World War II to the War on Terror.” U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2020/demo/acs-43.html>
- 9 “Caregivers of Veterans Spend \$11,500 on Average Each Year on Expenses, New Data Shows.” Military.com, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2023/11/14/caregivers-of-veterans-spend-11500-average-each-year-expenses-new-data-shows.html#:~:text=More%20than%206.5%20million%20veterans,offers%20extensive%20services%20for%20caregivers> and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Health Research, Caregivers and Family Support, [https://www.hsrdr.research.va.gov/research\\_topics/caregiving.cfm](https://www.hsrdr.research.va.gov/research_topics/caregiving.cfm)
- 10 The surveys were conducted online using reputable survey research panels. Online surveys are convenience samples, and thus, findings are not projectable to the larger population. Edge Research follows AAPOR best practices for survey administration.
- 11 March 8, 2024, Veteran Unemployment Rates, U.S. Department of Labor, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/latest-numbers>





### About Voya Cares®

As an extension of Voya's mission to make a secure financial future possible, the Voya Cares program is committed to making a positive difference in the lives of people with disabilities and special needs from birth through aging, by providing advocacy, resources and solutions. Visit [Voyacares.com](https://www.voyacares.com) to learn more.



### About Easterseals

Easterseals is leading the way to full equity, inclusion, and access through life-changing disability and community services. Trusted by families for more than 100 years, the organization has worked tirelessly with its partners to enhance quality of life and expand local access to healthcare, education, employment, and transportation. And we won't rest until every one of us is valued, respected, and accepted. Through its national network of 70 Affiliates, Easterseals provides essential services and on-the-ground supports each year to 1.5 million children and adults with disabilities, including veterans and older adults — from early childhood programs for the critical first five years to autism services, medical rehabilitation and employment programs, transportation and mobility services, veterans' programs, and more. The organization's public education, policy, and advocacy initiatives positively shape perceptions and address the urgent and evolving needs of one in four Americans with disabilities today. Together, we're empowering people with disabilities, families, and communities to be full and equal participants in society.

To learn more, visit [www.easterseals.com](https://www.easterseals.com).

---

This material has been provided for educational purposes only. This material was created to provide accurate and reliable information on the subjects covered. It is not intended to provide specific legal, tax or other professional advice.

Easterseals and the Voya® family of companies are not affiliated and are not responsible for each other's policies and services.

Voya Cares® and other Voya products and services are offered through the Voya family of companies.