

SAFE STEPS for Veterans Act (S. 4556)



Position

The American Physical Therapy Association strongly supports the SAFE STEPS for Veterans Act (S. 4556). The legislation would establish an Office of Falls Prevention within the Veterans Health Administration, tasked with preemptively identifying and treating veterans at risk of falling. The SAFE STEPS for Veterans Act was introduced by Sens. Angus King, I-M.E., and Mike Rounds, R-S.D.

Background

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), more than 1 out of 4 older Americans falls each year. A fall can result in unwanted outcomes, including injury, loss of independence, use of opioids, decreased ability to do meaningful activities, and death – in fact, every 19 minutes, an older adult dies as a result of a fall. Falling once doubles the chances of falling again. All told, accidental falls among older adults result in 3 million emergency room visits and 1 million hospital stays. The average falls-related hospitalization [costs \\$30,000](#), and falls rank fifth highest in terms of [personal health care spending](#).

[Many things can lead to falls](#), such as vision problems, loss of balance, certain medications, limited strength or flexibility, poor footwear, and clutter in the walking areas at home. Unlike with other medical conditions, there is no single test that can predict a fall, which is why frequent screening is crucial. In fact, the American Geriatrics Society recommends an [annual screening](#) for all adults aged 65 and older for a history of falls or balance impairment. Preventing falls is key, particularly among our more than 2 million veterans over 65 who, on average, have more chronic conditions than their non-veteran counterparts.

Due to the many various factors that can lead to falls, effective falls prevention requires annual screening and coordination across health care providers. However, neither the U.S. Department of

Veterans Affairs nor the VHA currently has a single authority to lead falls prevention efforts across the department. The VHA also does not include a screening requirement for veterans deemed to be a falls risk.

Solution

Coordinating falls prevention services and expanding screening would reduce the number of falls each year and save the VA millions of dollars a year by preventing hospitalizations. Enacting the SAFE STEPS for Veterans Act would help achieve this goal in multiple ways.

First, establishing an Office of Falls Prevention and creating a falls prevention coordinator within VHA would establish a point person on federal panels focused on falls prevention. This includes the HHS Administration on Community Living's Interagency Coordinating Committee of Aging. This coordinator would be required to develop a national education campaign to promote injury prevention programs. The coordinator's informational role would also extend to working with the National Institutes of Health to develop veteran-specific research for evidence-based falls prevention programs and a required report on falls prevention initiatives throughout the VA. A centralized coordinator tasked with focusing on falls prevention research and initiatives would streamline falls prevention efforts and ensure our veterans receive evidence-based proactive care.

Second, the SAFE STEPS for Veterans Act would require annual falls risk assessments to be carried out by a licensed physical therapist for veterans receiving extended care services throughout the VA. Physical therapists can assess risk factors and develop a plan to address them to help our veterans avoid falls and remain independent. As important, physical therapy can be an alternative that may reduce [long-term opioid medication use](#) as an effective means to [decrease preventable falls](#) in community-dwelling older adults.

Facts About Physical Therapists and Physical Therapist Assistants



Who We Are

Physical therapists are movement experts who help to optimize people's physical function, movement, performance, health, quality of life, and well-being. Physical therapists evaluate, diagnose, and manage movement conditions for individuals, and they also provide contributions to public health services aimed at improving population health and the human experience. Physical therapist assistants are educated and licensed or certified clinicians who provide care under the direction and supervision of a licensed physical therapist. PTs and PTAs care for people of all ages and abilities.

What We Do

After performing an evaluation and making a diagnosis, physical therapists create and implement personalized plans based on best available evidence to help their patients improve mobility, manage pain and other chronic conditions, recover from injury, and prevent future injury and chronic disease. PTs and PTAs empower people to be active participants in their care and well-being. They practice collaboratively with other health professionals to ensure the best clinical outcomes.

Where We Practice

PTs and PTAs provide services to people in a variety of settings, including outpatient clinics or offices; hospitals; inpatient rehabilitation facilities; skilled nursing, extended care, or subacute facilities; education or research centers; schools; community centers; hospices; industrial, workplace, or other occupational environments; and fitness centers and sports training facilities.

The Economic Value of Physical Therapy in the United States

A September 2023 report from the American Physical Therapy Association outlines the cost-effectiveness and economic value of physical therapist services for a broad range of common conditions. "The Economic Value of Physical Therapy in the United States" reinforces the importance of physical therapists and physical therapist assistants in improving patient outcomes and decreasing downstream costs. Policymakers should use this report to inform legislative and regulatory efforts for health care delivery and payment under Medicare, Medicaid, and commercial payers. **Review the findings at [ValueofPT.com](https://www.valueofpt.com).**

Education and Licensure

As of 2016, all PTs must receive a doctor of physical therapy degree from an accredited physical therapist education program before taking and passing a national licensure exam that permits them to practice. Licensure is required in each state (or other jurisdiction, including the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands) in which a PT practices. PTAs must complete a two-year associate's degree from an accredited physical therapist assistant program and pass a national exam. State licensure or certification is required in each state (or jurisdiction) in which a PTA works.

American Physical Therapy Association

The American Physical Therapy Association is a national organization representing more than 100,000 physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and students of physical therapy nationwide. Our mission is to build a community that advances the profession of physical therapy to improve the health of society.



Co-sponsor S. 4556 today!

For more information and contact info for APTA Government Affairs staff, scan here or visit [apta.org/position-paper](https://www.apta.org/position-paper).

