

HOME IMPROVEMENTS AND STRUCTURAL ALTERATIONS (HISA) PROGRAM

1. **REASON FOR ISSUE:** This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Handbook updates Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) procedures for governing the Home Improvement and Structural Alterations (HISA) program for veteran beneficiaries.
2. **SUMMARY OF CHANGES:** This VHA Handbook updates current procedures.
3. **RELATED ISSUES:** VHA Directive 1173, and VHA Handbooks 1173.1 through 1173.15.
4. **RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** The Chief Consultant, Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service Strategic Healthcare Group (113), is responsible for the contents of this VHA Handbook. Questions may be referred to 202-273-8515.
5. **RESCISSIONS:** None
6. **RECERTIFICATION:** This document is scheduled for recertification on or before the last working day of July 2005.

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HOME IMPROVEMENTS AND STRUCTURAL ALTERATIONS (HISA) PROGRAM

1. PURPOSE

This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Handbook establishes uniform and consistent system-wide procedures governing the Home Improvement and Structural Alterations (HISA) program for veteran beneficiaries. *NOTE: The procedures presented in this Handbook serve as guidelines only. Each individual case must be reviewed and evaluated based on the specific needs of the veteran involved. This is especially true where the patient presents multiple disabilities.*

2. SCOPE

a. Title 38 United States Code (U.S.C), Section 1717, is the statutory authority for the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide Home Improvements and Structural Alterations (HISA) grants to eligible veterans. Public Law 102-405 increased the lifetime benefit limitation for service connected veterans HISA benefits from \$2,500 to \$4,100, and non-service connected veterans HISA benefits from \$600 to \$1,200.

b. The HISA benefit is limited to the improvement and structural alterations necessary only to assure the continuation of treatment and/or provide access to the home or to essential lavatory and sanitary facilities. *NOTE: It does not include those improvements which would serve only to lend comfort to the individual or make life outside the health care facility more acceptable.*

3. HISA GRANTS

a. HISA grants provide for medically necessary improvements and/or structural changes to the veteran's residence for the following purposes:

- (1) Allowing entrance to or exit from the veteran's residence.
- (2) Use of essential lavatory and sanitary facilities.
- (3) Allowing accessibility to kitchen or bathroom sinks or counters.
- (4) Improving entrance paths or driveways in immediate area of the home to facilitate access to the home by the veteran.
- (5) Improving plumbing or electrical systems made necessary due to installation of dialysis equipment in the home.

b. Improvements can include, but are not limited to:

- (1) **Door Latches.** Door latch handles must be easy to operate and grasp.
- (2) **Entrances.** Minimum width of all doors should be 3 feet (36 inches). Renovation work where 3 foot openings are impossible, opening of 2 feet 8 inches (32 inches is acceptable). A

maneuvering area with a minimum length of 4 feet 6 inches (54 inches) should be provided on each side of all doors.

(3) **Electrical Outlets and Wall Switches.** Wall mounted outlets should be located at a maximum height of 4 feet (48 inches) and a minimum height of 1 foot, 6 inches (18 inches).

(4) **Handrails.** Primary functions of hand rails are to act as a safety barrier to protect the user from a fall, to aid with balance, or to allow a wheelchair user a means for propulsion. Handrails should be smooth and continuous, and must be provided on both sides of a ramp.

(5) **Ramps.** Permanent ramping constructed of wood or concrete that is built according to the American Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines.

(6) **Windows.** Window controls must be accessible and easy to operate. Controls for windows should be located at a maximum height of 4 feet, 6 inches (54 inches). Controls for curtains and blinds should be similarly accessible.

4. ELIGIBILITY

a. Veterans receiving treatment from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) under the auspices of 38 U.S.C. Section 1710 are eligible for HISA benefits as follows:

(1) \$4,100 lifetime HISA benefit when necessary for:

(a) Service connected condition.

(b) Non-service connected condition of a veteran rated 50 percent or more service connected.

(c) Non-service connected condition of a veteran in receipt of 38 U.S.C. Section 1151 benefits.

(2) \$1,200 lifetime HISA benefit when necessary for treatment of a non-service connected condition of veterans who are:

(a) Rated less than 50 percent service connected.

(b) Discharged or released from active duty for a disability incurred or aggravated in the line of duty.

(c) Former Prisoners of War, veterans of the Mexican Border period or World War I.

(d) Unable to defray the expenses of necessary care as determined under 38 U.S.C. Section 1722 (a), i.e., veterans who qualify through "means testing," as determined via Medical Care Cost Fund (MCCF).

(e) Eligible for benefits under 38 U.S.C. Section 1710(a)(2)(F) and (e), due to exposure to a toxic substance, radiation, or an environmental hazard.

(f) Veterans who are required to pay a copayment for their care are eligible for the \$1,200.00 benefit due to enactment of Public Law 105-114, Section 402(b)(2).

5. IMPROVEMENT AND STRUCTURAL ALTERATIONS

a. Improvement and structural alterations chargeable against the veteran's cost limitation include, but are not limited to:

- (1) Roll-in showers.
- (2) Construction of wooden or concrete, permanent ramping to provide access to the home.
- (3) Widening doorways to bedroom, bathroom, etc., to achieve wheelchair access.
- (4) Lowering of kitchen or bathroom counters and sinks.
- (5) Improving entrance paths and driveways in immediate area of home to facilitate access to the home.
- (6) Construction of concrete pads and installation of exterior types of wheelchair lift mechanisms if the installation cost exceeds \$500.00.
- (7) Interior and exterior railing deemed necessary for patients with ambulatory capability or for veterans rated legally blind if the installation cost is over \$500.00.
- (8) Improvements to plumbing or electrical systems made necessary due to the installation of dialysis equipment in the home.
- (9) Any cost associated with permits, inspection fees, etc., that are required by local ordinances.

b. Improvements and structural alterations, which are not chargeable against the veteran's HISA limitation include:

- (1) Exterior decking (in excess of 6 foot by 6 foot or the area necessary to accommodate wheelchair access).
- (2) Construction of pathways to exterior buildings such as barns or workshops.
- (3) Widening driveways (in excess of 7 foot by 6 foot or area necessary to accommodate wheelchair and van lifts).
- (4) Purchase or installation of spa, hot tub, or jacuzzi-type tubs.
- (5) Minor installation fees (under \$500.00) made necessary to install removable equipment such as lifts and railing: **NOTE:** *These fees are chargeable as a prosthetic item and not HISA.*

(6) Purchase of removable equipment or appliances such as handrails, porch lifts and stair glides. *NOTE: These removable items are chargeable as a prosthetic item and not HISA.*

(7) Projects which would duplicate services previously provided by the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) grant such as central air conditioning and roll-in showers. HISA and SAH are mutually exclusive of each other.

(8) Purchase or installation of home security systems.

(9) Routine repairs done as part of regular home maintenance, e.g., replacing roofs, furnaces, air conditioner, etc.

(10) Remodeling of existing bathrooms or building of new bathrooms except for the items allowed under subparagraph 5a.

6. HISA PROGRAM RESPONSIBILITIES

a. **Chief Consultant, Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Strategic Healthcare Group.** The Chief Consultant, Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Strategic Healthcare Group (113) is responsible for monitoring the HISA Program to ensure appropriate funding and consistency in the administration of the HISA benefits.

b. **Director, Local VA Health Care Facility.** The Director of the local VA health care facility has the responsibility to:

(1) Publish local VA medical center policy memoranda to inform staff, Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), and veterans of the procedures to follow to obtain HISA benefits.

(2) Establish a local HISA Benefits Committee with a physician appointed as Chairman. The HISA Committee will consist of such staff physicians, therapists, nurses, social workers, patient representatives, and VSOs as are deemed necessary.

(3) Appoint the Chief, Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service, as the committee coordinator and to serve as the veterans point of contact.

c. **Chief, Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service.** The Chief, Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service, is to:

(1) Actively publicize the HISA Programs to identify eligible veterans and to inform them of their benefits.

(2) Assist the designated Committee members in becoming familiar with the applicable guidelines for administering the HISA Program.

(3) Screen applications to ensure that there is no duplication of benefits, to ensure the appropriate use of the benefit and to ensure that the application is complete prior to presentation to the HISA Committee.

- (4) Present the complete application to the Committee members for approval/disapproval.
- (5) Communicate the Committee's decision to the applicant.
- (6) Review the SAH benefits as administered by the Veterans Benefits Administration and to avoid any duplication of benefits, e.g., SAH provision of accessible bathroom would eliminate future need for bathroom modifications, central air conditioning provided under SAH cannot be repaired or replaced under HISA, etc.
- (7) Administer the appropriate obligations to the contractor to facilitate the completion of the approved project. If a contractor is not utilized, the Chief, Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service, is responsible for notifying Engineering Service at the local facility to inspect the property to ensure compliance with established guidelines.
- (8) Authorize claims for payment or reimbursement of costs or services performed (without prior authorization) when:
 - (a) The veteran meets both the legal eligibility and medical entitlement for the modifications for which reimbursement is sought, and
 - (b) The claim is submitted within 30 days of the date that the improvement or alteration was performed, or
 - (c) Documented evidence indicates that an application was made for the benefit, or a VA physician recommended furnishing the improvement or alteration before the work was performed. *NOTE: Follow-up on approved projects as to the status will be the responsibility of the Chief, Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service.*
 - (d) If the project is cancelled for any reason (e.g., death of veteran, relocation, etc.) all funds obligated will promptly be cancelled.

7. APPLICATION PROCESS FOR HISA BENEFITS:

- a. A prescription from a VA, or fee-basis, physician for HISA modifications is required and must include the following:
 - (1) Specific item(s) needed, such as: wheelchair ramp, widening of doorways, bathroom modifications. *NOTE: If the physician needs assistance in determining what modifications are needed, the patient should be referred to Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Service for consultation.*
 - (2) Diagnosis and medical justification for the item(s) requested.
 - (3) Veteran's name, address, Social Security Number (SSN), and phone number.
- b. The veteran must provide the following:

(1) Completed and signed VA Form 10-0103, Veterans Application for Assistance in Acquiring HISA.

(2) If the veteran leases or rents a home, the veteran must obtain a written statement from the owner of the property authorizing the project to be done.

(3) Obtain and submit a bid from a licensed contractor, which must include the following:

(a) Contractor's name, address, telephone number, and SSN or Federal tax number.

(b) Veteran's name, address, and telephone number.

(c) Written statement and plans of project that is to be performed.

(d) Itemized list of materials, material costs, and labor costs for each part of the project.

(e) Total cost for labor and materials for the entire project.

(f) Permits if required by local government agency. Obtaining permits is a licensed contractor's responsibility.

(4) A signed acknowledgement that VA: assumes no responsibility for maintenance, item repair or replacement; assumes no liability for the product; extends no warranties either expressed or implied; assumes no liability for damage caused by such equipment or devices, or for their removal, when no longer needed or wanted. The veteran is responsible for all contract work not authorized by VA.

c. The following will be required from the contractor.

(1) Contractor must be willing to accept a government purchase order and understand that the payment will not be made until completion of the authorized work and the receipt of a signed letter of satisfaction from the veteran.

(2) Contractor bids will provide a complete description of the proposed project to include:

(a) A sketch of the area to be altered or improved as it appears now. It must show the location of permanent fixtures such as walls, doors, windows, shower stalls, driveways or walks, if appropriate. The sketch must include measurements and specifications of these items.

(b) A sketch showing the area as it will appear after the proposed project. The items mentioned in preceding subparagraph 7c(2)(a), should be shown with the new specifications and measurements.

(c) If a ramp is to be constructed, include an individual sketch of the ramp indicating type of construction materials, slope width and height. The slope of a ramp cannot be approved if it exceeds 1 inch increase in height per running foot of ramp. In general, a ramp cannot be approved if it has more than 5 percent grade or has a maximum slope of 1:12 or less. Any ramp must include railings and guards to prevent a wheelchair or scooter from running off the edges.

- (d) If a driveway or walkway is to be improved, include information about the material composing the existing area, such as, gravel, concrete, asphalt, etc.
- (e) Contractor must itemize the construction materials, the material costs, and the labor costs for each part of the project, and the total cost of labor and materials for the entire project.
- (f) Contractor is responsible for complying with all state and local building codes.
- (g) Upon completion, the contractor will certify that the work meets Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards and VA specifications as contained in the scope of work.

d. **The HISA Committee.** The HISA Committee will be responsible for:

- (1) Determining if the veteran has received the SAH grant for the item(s) requested.
- (2) Evaluation and approval or disapproval of the request and bid.
- (3) Advising the veteran of the decision.
- (4) In the event the veteran resides outside the local Prosthetic Primary Service Area (PSA), the request will be referred to the appropriate VA facility.
- (5) If approved, Chief, Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service, will send VA Form 10-7078, Authorization and Invoice for Medical and Hospital Services, and appropriate documents authorizing the contractor to proceed with the project.
- (6) Upon completion of the project and receipt of the veteran satisfaction statement and an invoice, the claim will be processed for payment through Fiscal Service.
- (7) HISA program cost will be posted to a Medical Care Appropriation Cost Center through the Prosthetic VISTA on each veteran's VA Form 10-2319 (ADP) utilizing the appropriate Health Care Financing Administration Common Procedure Coding System (HCPCS) code, i.e., HISAN (non-service connected) or HISAS (service connected).

8. INQUIRIES

Unusual requests or inquiries relating to the HISA Program that cannot be resolved by the local HISA Committee should be referred to the Chief Consultant, Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service Strategic Healthcare Group (113), VHA Headquarters, Washington, DC, by submitting a VA Form 10-2641, Authority for Issuance of Special or Experimental Appliances. **NOTE:** *This review is intended to expedite a resolution of unusual requests and/or inquiries and should not be considered as a substitute for the normal process.*