

## VA Abortion Rollback Sparks National Debate on Veterans' Care

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The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has announced plans to roll back its abortion services, effectively ending nearly all procedures at VA facilities and withdrawing coverage under its health program for dependents. The proposed changes return the VA to its pre-2022 policy, which restricted abortion access solely to cases where the pregnancy endangers the life of the mother.

Published Monday in the Federal Register, the new rule would eliminate coverage in cases of rape and incest exceptions previously introduced after the Supreme Court's 2022 decision to overturn Roe v. Wade. Under the Biden administration, the VA had expanded abortion services for eligible veterans and dependents to include cases of rape, incest, and significant health risks. That expansion is now being labelled by current officials as "legally questionable."

VA Secretary Doug Collins stated that the former policy had effectively created a federal entitlement to abortion, something not grounded in statute. "The last administration used the Dobbs ruling to dramatically expand abortion access at the VA, overstepping the legal boundaries set by Congress," Collins wrote.

Between 2022 and 2023, the VA covered 88 abortions, nine involving life-threatening situations and 15 resulting from rape. The remaining 64 were authorised due to broader health concerns, which sparked criticism from lawmakers who said the policy may have exceeded the federal Hyde Amendment. That law permits federal abortion funding only in cases of rape, incest, or threats to the mother's life.

The new proposal would narrow access exclusively to life-threatening pregnancies. Conditions such as ectopic pregnancies or miscarriages requiring emergency treatment would still be covered, provided a VA physician certifies the risk to the mother's life.

The announcement drew sharp reactions. Advocates for expanded access to abortion services, including veterans' groups and some politicians, condemned the move. They argued that the rollback fails to account for the unique healthcare needs of female veterans.

Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) called the proposed changes "a harmful and reckless move," asserting they undermine promises made to women veterans. Similarly, Nancy Northup of the Center for Reproductive Rights claimed the administration was placing ideology above veterans' health needs.

However, many Republican lawmakers applauded the reversal. Six members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee called the 2022 policy "disastrous," claiming it politicised the VA's core mission. "Taxpayers do not want their money used to fund abortion services," said Committee Chairman Rep. Mike Bost of Illinois.

According to the Commonwealth Fund, around 42% of the 2 million female veterans in the U.S. are of childbearing age and use VA health services. The proposed policy would also affect the 417,000 beneficiaries under the CHAMPVA program, which covers some spouses and dependents of veterans.

The public has until September 3 to comment on the proposed rule. After that, the VA will review feedback before issuing a final decision.