The Net Asset Value Desk
TSP INTELLIGENCE CENTER

PRACTICAL FINANCIAL EDUCATION

Budgeting, *a plan* for every paycheck

How to plan a month: assign your income to spending, saving and debt before the month begins, track against your plan all month, and adjust as life happens.

⏱ 8 minutes | Plan to $0 | Every membership

Start reading › | Open your Budget in NAV Desk

INTERACTIVE EXAMPLE CALCULATOR

Planned Income (Paychecks)	5000
Charity & Savings	800
Housing & Utilities	2200
Food & Transportation	1200
Other Lines & Debt	800

Fully planned ($0 left to plan)

Change the example amounts above to see the calculation update live.

01

List your income

A plan-to-$0 budget starts with the money coming in during the month. Write down each expected paycheck and any side income, with its expected date and dollar amount.

Planning income on specific dates helps prevent cash crunches mid-month. Rather than looking at a lump-sum monthly total, mapping each paycheck lets you assign specific bills to specific paydays.

💡 **Irregular or commission income?** Plan your baseline budget around a lean month (such as your lowest monthly income over the past year). Treat extra money that comes in as an addition to savings, debt payoff, or sinking funds rather than increasing baseline lifestyle spending.

Income Planning Checklist

- Primary take-home pay (after taxes and payroll deductions)
- Secondary earner paychecks and regular bonuses
- Pension, VA disability or Social Security deposits
- Side business or rental income

02

List your expenses

Organize your outflows into clear groups, covering the essentials first (housing, utilities, food and transportation), then savings, lifestyle, and other priorities.

The Essential Categories

Before discretionary spending, make sure the essentials have a planned dollar amount:

1. **Food:** Groceries and household staples
2. **Utilities:** Electricity, water, heat, essential internet
3. **Housing:** Rent or mortgage payment, property taxes, insurance
4. **Transportation:** Gas, basic vehicle upkeep, transit fares

Once essentials are budgeted, organize groups for Charity, Savings, Once a year, Lifestyle, Debt, Health, and Personal. Starter groups include a dedicated "Once a year" group for sinking funds and a "Miscellaneous" line for minor unexpected expenses.

⚠️ **Avoid vague catch-alls:** Keep your "Miscellaneous" line small for genuinely unexpected items, and create targeted lines for repeat items like coffee, haircuts, or pet supplies.

03

Subtract planned expenses from planned income until your remaining amount equals exactly $0. Accountants call this zero-based budgeting: you start from zero each month instead of last month's numbers.

Planning to $0 does not mean your bank account reaches $0. It means every single dollar of income is assigned on paper to a specific purpose: spending, saving, investing, or debt reduction.

If you finish drafting your budget and have $300 left over, that money is unassigned. Assign it to an emergency fund, extra debt payment, or upcoming goal until "Left to budget" reads $0.

The Check Line

Directly under the navy header band, one clear line tells you where your plan stands:

✓ $0 left to budget. Every dollar has a job.

$X left to budget (Unassigned dollars)

Over plan by $X (Expenses exceed income)

04

Track all month

A budget only works if you measure reality against it. Record transactions as they occur, compare actual spending to planned lines, and adjust when unexpected costs arise.

How the Transactions Tray Works

Transactions live in one tray opened from the floating button at bottom right with a count badge (e.g. "10 new"):

- **New:** Review and assign incoming transactions to a planned line item.

- **Tracked:** View cleared transactions filed to each line or group.
- **Split:** Split any store trip or payment across multiple lines.
- **Merchant rules:** Save rules so repeat merchants auto-file confident matches.

Expect your plan to change. If your car needs a $150 repair and the maintenance line only had $50, move $100 from clothing or dining out to cover it. The overall budget stays balanced at zero.

Planned vs. Spent vs. Remaining: Use the gold view switch in the navy header band to toggle between your planned target, actual spending to date with thin progress bars, or the exact dollars remaining for each line and group.

05

check-in, debt import, cash-flow forecasting, recurring charges, and export at any time.

Monthly Transition Routine

1. Review any remaining unassigned transactions in your New tray.
2. Check which lines had remaining surpluses or deficits.
3. Copy the plan forward to the upcoming month.
4. Add known one-time expenses (car registration, holiday travel).
5. Balance to $0 left to budget.



Sinking funds & paycheck planning

Two essential strategies that prevent large, irregular bills from feeling like emergencies.

What is a Sinking Fund?

A sinking fund saves a small amount each month for a known future expense:

For example, if your annual auto insurance is $1,200 due in 6 months, setting a fund target of $1,200 computes a monthly amount needed of $200. The accumulated balance carries over each month until paid.

Planning by Paycheck

If you receive biweekly or semi-monthly paychecks, assign each expense line to the specific paycheck that will pay it.

The "By paycheck" view in NAV Desk groups your expenses under Paycheck 1 and Paycheck 2, showing a dedicated zero-based balance for each pay period.

Check yourself

Test your understanding of planning a month to $0:

1. What does planning a month to $0 mean?

- Your bank balance reaches zero at month-end
- Planned income minus planned expenses equals exactly $0
- You spend $0 on discretionary entertainment

2. What should you do first when budgeting irregular income?

- Plan on your highest anticipated month

Base your plan on a lean baseline month and treat excess as a bonus

Stop tracking expenses until income stabilizes

3. What is a sinking fund?

An investment fund that loses money over time

Saving a small amount each month for a known future expense

An unbudgeted emergency expense

4. What happens to transactions from linked accounts in NAV Desk?

They are deleted if not categorized within 24 hours

They land in the New tray ready to assign, split, or auto-assign via rules

They automatically overwrite your manual cash transactions

Plan to $0

Tap to view definition

Sinking fund

Tap to view definition

Transaction tray

Tap to view definition

Paycheck planning

Debt snowball

Tap to view definition

Tap to view definition

TRACK 1

TSP Intelligence Center

Federal employees, military personnel and retirees

- ✓ **TSP core and the window in one total**
  Your TSP funds and Mutual Fund Window holdings together, with today's estimated move.
- ✓ **Noon ET cutoff clock**
  A countdown to the interfund transfer cutoff and a count of transfers used this month.
- ✓ **Fund signals**
  A Favorable, Neutral or Unfavorable read on each core fund. You make every move.
- ✓ **Fund Radar**
  All 69 Mutual Fund Window funds ranked daily on momentum and trend.
- ✓ **Retirement planner**
  FERS pension, supplement, Social Security and TSP withdrawals in today's dollars.
- ✓ **Seasonal plan**
  Two decades of official TSP prices turned into a color-coded plan.

TRACK 2

Everyone, TSP or not

Your whole financial picture in one place

- ✓ **Link your accounts**
  Bank, brokerage, loans and credit cards, connected view only.
- ✓ **Monthly plan**
  Plan your income to $0, manage sinking funds, and track by paycheck.

- **Net worth in one number**
  Everything you own minus everything you owe, kept current.
- **Stocks, ETFs and crypto**
  Your holdings side by side, with price watches you set.
- **Debt payoff plan**
  A debt-free date and reminders before each payment is due.
- **Agentic Think Tank**
  AI agents write quantitative reports on your desk data.

Private by design. NAV Desk never asks for your TSP login, linked accounts are view only, and your data is never sold.

Open Budget in NAV Desk ›

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