



# Washington Update

*Recent news regarding legislation and regulatory actions affecting veterans and people with disabilities.*

Written and produced by Paralyzed Veterans of America - Government Relations Department

March 18, 2021

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Visit [PVA's VoterVoice Portal](#) to view our latest alerts and a list of key bills and their status.

## **NATIONAL PRESIDENT EXPLAINS PVA LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES TO CONGRESS**

On March 4, PVA National President David Zurfluh testified before a Joint Session of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs about PVA's 2021 legislative policy priorities. In his written and oral testimonies, President Zurfluh spoke of the importance of preserving VA's SCI/D System of Care, increasing access to specialized long-term care, accelerating the implementation of VA's Caregiver Program, increasing VA transportation assistance to SCI/D veterans, improving access to IVF services, and enhancing accessibility and types of care for women veterans. To view the entire hearing, click [here](#). If you want to observe just the PVA portions, his oral statement begins at 2:12:33 with additional interactions with members of Congress during the Q&A sessions at the 2:42:33, 3:00:50, 3:11:36, 3:16:30, and 3:19:10 marks. Also, you can read his full written statement [here](#).

## **LEGISLATION TO EXPAND VA'S AUTHORITY TO PROVIDE THE COVID VACCINE TO VETERANS' CAREGIVERS STILL PENDING**

PVA is closely tracking VA's ability to deliver the COVID-19 vaccine to our members and their caregivers. In late February, VA elevated veterans with SCI/D from CDC Phase 1c to CDC Phase 1b in VA's phased allocation approach. Legislatively, efforts are underway to expedite the delivery of the vaccine to caregivers as well. On March 9, the House unanimously passed H.R. 1276, the Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans' and Caregivers' COVID-19 Immunizations Now Expanded Act of 2021 (VA VACCINE Act). This bipartisan bill would expand VA's authority to provide COVID-19 vaccines to all veterans and their caregivers. On

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March 17, the Senate amended the House's legislation to include access for spouses. Now, the House and Senate will need to work on their differences to pass the final legislation. PVA members seeking information about getting their vaccine at VA facilities should visit [here](#) and consider signing up to have notifications sent to them.

## **VA ASSET AND INFRASTRUCTURE REVIEW PUBLIC LISTENING SESSIONS**

In response to the VA MISSION Act of 2018, VA is hosting public virtual listening sessions that will run from March through June 2021. VA wants to hear from veterans on how to design a health care system of the future and grow services for veterans in a way that reinforces VA's role as a leader in the U.S. health care system.

During the listening session, VA is interested in hearing from veterans on the following topics:

- How they want care to be delivered in the future
- Their perception of the quality of health care at VA and through VA's community network
- Their ability to get care at VA and within VA's community network
- Their satisfaction with the condition and location of VA's facilities
- VA's role in research, education, and emergency preparedness

The feedback will be used to develop the recommendations VA submits to the Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission in January 2022. The AIR Commission will also conduct public hearings as part of their review of VA's recommendations before submitting its recommendations to the President and Congress for review and approval in 2023.

To register for an event in your region, click [here](#). A session will also be hosted in Spanish. Once a date and time have been confirmed, the session details will be announced on registration site.

## **AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN SIGNED INTO LAW**

President Biden wasted no time signing the American Rescue Plan which provides a third round of stimulus checks for many Americans and allocates additional funding for COVID-19 vaccine distribution, state and local governments, small businesses, and anti-poverty programs. As we reported in the previous Washington Update, VA is receiving a significant infusion of cash from the \$1.9 trillion measure. Much of the \$17 billion slated for VA goes directly toward the care of veterans. This includes covering more expensive care that veterans may need after a year of enduring the pandemic and addressing the coming surge of Compensation and Pension Exams and elective procedures that were put on hold over the past year. The remaining funding will go toward things like VA's supply chain modernization efforts, supporting state veteran homes,

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providing retraining assistance to veterans who became unemployed because of the pandemic, and waiving copayments for veterans who sought VA medical care over the past year.

The massive legislation also included several provisions representing significant victories for the disability community. After a yearlong effort by advocates, Congress increased federal Medicaid matching funds by 10 percent to support home and community-based services for one year beginning April 1, 2021. Those additional funds are on top of the 6.2 percentage point increase in the federal share for the Medicaid program provided in earlier COVID packages and will pay for an array of services designed to keep people out of institutions. Special education programs received \$3 billion in enhanced support and families with adult dependents, who had been excluded from previous COVID relief bills, will finally receive economic impact payments for those individuals.

The bill also significantly expands the subsidies in the ACA Marketplaces to cover more middle-class families. Specifically, it removes the current cap that makes any family with income above 400 percent of the poverty level ineligible for any subsidies. It also provides that individuals below 150 percent of the poverty level pay no premiums at all compared to 4 percent of their income currently.

In addition, the bill provides a new incentive for the 12 states that have not expanded Medicaid to do so by temporarily increasing the base federal match by five percentage points for two years for any state that newly expands its program. If all 12 remaining states expanded Medicaid, more than 2 million uninsured people would gain access to Medicaid.

The bill also extends federal unemployment compensation benefits of \$300 per week through September 6, 2021, and exempts from income taxes the first \$10,200 of unemployment benefits received in 2020. Additionally, it contains a tax rebate of \$1,400 for individuals with incomes of \$75,000 or less, increased by \$1,400 for each dependent. It would expand eligibility and increase the maximum earned income tax credit (EITC) for childless adults and increase the child tax credit (CTC) to \$3,000 per child (with a more generous \$3,600 credit for children under the age of 6). Furthermore, it expands and extends through September 2021 paid sick and family leave tax credits for employers and provides for full federal subsidies of individual COBRA premiums for six months for those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

The law also included significant increases in housing and nutrition assistance and support for low income energy assistance programs. A detailed summary of the American Rescue Plan published by the Senate Majority Leader's office can be found [here](#).

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## NEWS ITEMS OF NOTE

- Reintroduction of AUTO for Veterans Act

Senator Susan Collins (R-ME), Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV), Senator John Boozman (R-AR), Senator Maggie Hassan (D-NH), and Senator Roy Blunt (R-MO) have re-introduced **S. 444, the Advancing Uniform Transportation Opportunities for Veterans Act, or AUTO for Veterans Act**. A companion bill, **H.R. 1361**, was introduced in the House by Representative Daniel Meuser (R-PA) and Representative David Trone (D-MD). The bill would expand access to transportation for disabled veterans by allowing qualifying veterans to receive an additional Automobile Grant, every ten years. [Please contact your members of Congress to ask them to cosponsor this important legislation.](#)

- Transportation Access Legislation Introduced

On March 9, Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Senator Bob Casey (D-PA), Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Senator Ed Markey (D-MA), Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), and Senator Maggie Hassan (D-NH) and Representative Jim Langevin (D-RI), Representative Dina Titus (D-NV), and Representative Steve Cohen (D-TN) introduced the **Air Carrier Access Amendments Act (ACAAA) (S. 642/H.R. 1696)**, which would require airlines to meet access standards on aircraft and create a private right of action for passengers with disabilities who face discrimination. [Please contact your members of Congress to ask them to cosponsor this important legislation.](#) That same day, Representative Langevin also introduced the Disability Access Transportation Act (DATA) (H.R. 1697), which would implement a “one stop” para transit pilot program and pedestrian rights of way standard along with an accessibility transportation complaint hotline in the Office of Civil Rights in the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration.

- Disability Employment Incentive Act Introduced

Senator Bob Casey (D-PA) introduced the **Disability Employment Incentive Act, S. 630**, on March 9 with seven original cosponsors - Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), Senator Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), and Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY). One of PVA’s legislative priorities for the 117th Congress, the bill would expand the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC), extend application of WOTC to SSDI beneficiaries, and increase the disabled access credit and the deduction for expenditures to remove architectural and transportation barriers to the disabled and elderly. It was referred to the Senate Committee on Finance. There is no House companion bill at this time. [Please contact your members of Congress to ask them to cosponsor this important bill.](#)

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- NCSL Report on COVID-19 Impact on Disability Employment and the Economy

The National Conference of State Legislatures published a new report that examines economic data and workforce trends following the emergence of COVID-19. It shows how the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of telework and digital services, presenting both new opportunities and new barriers for people with disabilities. The report can be found [here](#).

- VGLI Premium Reductions Coming Soon

VA has announced it will reduce the premiums for all veterans insured under the Veterans' Group Life Insurance (VGLI) program, effective April 1, 2021. Premiums for VGLI will be reduced by an average of 6 percent across all age groups. These premium reductions will ensure that VGLI remains an affordable option for veterans who choose VA insurance products. Read more [here](#).

- President Biden Issues Executive Order on Voting

On March 7, President Joe Biden issued an Executive Order on promoting access to voting for all Americans. The right to vote is the foundation of American democracy. But many Americans, including people with disabilities, continue to face barriers to voting and are denied legally required accommodations in exercising their fundamental rights and the ability to vote privately and independently. For more information, please see the [fact sheet](#) about the Executive Order.

- VA's Caregiver Program Expansion

On October 1, 2020, VA began the expansion of its Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC). The expansion will occur in two phases. Phase I began on October 1, 2020, includes family caregivers of veterans who were seriously injured in the line of duty on or before May 7, 1975. Phase II will begin on October 1, 2022, and will include family caregivers of veterans who were seriously injured in the line of duty on or after May 8, 1975, and on or before September 10, 2001. To view a webinar on the expansion, please [click here](#). A Q&A based on questions received during the webinar is available [here](#). PVA is urging Congress to expedite the expansion of Phase II to October 2021 as VA was delayed by one year in its roll out due to IT and other problems.

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## HEARINGS/WEBINARS/ FORUMS/SURVEYS

- Hearing: Challenges Facing Veterans in Accessing Fertility Services

On March 9, PVA Associate Legislative Director, Maureen Elias, testified before the House Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies at a hearing entitled, "Challenges Facing Veterans in Accessing Fertility Services." Ms. Elias' comments included advocating for a decoupling of the 2012 Department of Defense policy which would allow VA more freedom to implement services, allowing the use of gamete donation and surrogacy, and making assisted reproductive technology a permanent part of the VA medical benefits package. The hearing was virtual and is available for viewing [here](#).

- Autonomous Vehicle Online Dialogue and Forum Series

Now through May 5, "[Inclusive Design of Autonomous Vehicles: A Public Dialogue](#)" is open for participants to share ideas for the design of autonomous vehicles (AVs) to accommodate the needs of people with physical, sensory, and cognitive disabilities. The U.S. Access Board hosts the dialogue through the Office of Disability Employment Policy's ePolicyWorks initiative.

The Access Board is also hosting a [series of four virtual meetings on making AVs accessible to passengers with disabilities](#). The first session was held on March 10. The next sessions will be held on March 24, April 7, and April 21, from 2:00-3:30 p.m. ET. Each session will cover a different topic related to the accessibility of AVs for people with disabilities. The meetings will be open forums for the public and stakeholders to discuss considerations, challenges, and solutions in designing accessible AVs. Attendees will be able to pose questions and share comments, suggestions, and information.

- Customized Employment Works for Veterans Videos

The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy and Veterans' Employment and Training Service, and VA, released two videos featuring businesses that meet their hiring needs by using Customized Employment to hire veterans with disabilities. The videos on "[Customized Employment Works for Veterans: A Job that I Love](#)" and "[Customized Employment Works for Veterans: A Win-Win Strategy](#)" are available for viewing online.

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- Men and Women with SCI Needed for Social Connections After Injury Study

A research study funded by a grant to Baylor College of Medicine (BCM) from the Department of Defense seeks participants with SCI. Conducted by investigators from BCM, TIRR-Memorial Hermann's Spinal Cord Injury and Disability Research Center, and the University of Montana's Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities, the SCI Study is focusing on the social and psychological health of people with SCI. Participants must be at least 18 years of age; have an SCI; had their injury for at least one year; and be able to answer questions in English. After completing a telephone interview to determine eligibility, study participants answer survey questions (by phone, online, or paper-and-pencil questionnaire) twice, one year apart. A small payment is offered for completing each questionnaire. For more information, contact the study directors by email at [SClstudy@bcm.edu](mailto:SClstudy@bcm.edu) or by phone at 713-797-7107. Callers are asked to leave their name and phone number to receive a return call.