



Paralyzed Veterans
of America

WASHINGTON UPDATE

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

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PVA DEPUTY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SHARES VIEWS ON SOCIAL SECURITY

On May 2nd, Deputy Executive Director Shaun Castle participated in a roundtable convened by House Ways and Means Social Security Subcommittee Chairman John Larson (D-CT). The purpose of the meeting was to provide an opportunity for students at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government to present a proposal for ensuring the solvency of Social Security. Present at the forum were a number of members of the Ways and Means Committee as well as former Senator Heidi Heitkamp and former National Economic Council Advisor Gary Cohn.

Chairman Larson also gathered a group of advocates so the students could learn what the legislative process is really like. In addition to Mr. Castle, representatives from the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare and Social Security Works took part in the discussion to offer up "real world" reflections about the impact of Social Security in the lives of everyday Americans. As a member of the millennial generation, Mr. Castle's remarks focused largely on the importance of the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) program to younger Americans with disabilities and the positive difference that SSDI made in his own life.

VETERANS COMMUNITY CARE PROGRAM ON TRACK FOR JUNE LAUNCH

On June 6th, the Veterans Community Care Program (VCCP) will go into effect. The VCCP is the result of the VA MISSION Act that streamlined VA's seven community care programs into one. Through the VCCP, more veterans will be eligible for community care. VA is also promising that scheduling appointments will be easier and the care coordination between VA and community providers will be better. In addition, VA has developed education and training materials to help community providers understand some of the unique challenges veterans may encounter.

Although PVA has expressed concerns about the readiness of VA to roll out the program, particularly in light of the status of IT solutions that will help facilitate it, VA has asserted that it is

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ready for the program's rollout. VA has made some information about the program available online. In addition, veterans enrolled in VA health care will receive a letter in the mail providing details on where to go for more information.

On June 4th at 3:00 pm ET, PVA will host a webinar to help members learn more about the VCCP and the status of other VA MISSION Act provisions. To register for the webinar, please visit: <https://zoom.us/webinar/register/5aa0630bf5c5a74a34538d7d4481ef37>. In the meantime, for more information the VCCP, please visit: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/58621/new-eligibility-criteria-a-major-improvement-over-existing-rules>.

CONGRESS HOLDS HEARING ON VETERAN SUICIDE

A growing trend of veterans taking their lives on VA property prompted the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) to hold a rare nighttime hearing in late April to examine the continuing crisis. Sadly, the fourth death by suicide on VA property in the month of April occurred hours before the April 29th event which was entitled, "*Tragic Trends: Suicide Prevention Among Veterans.*" Witnesses included officials from the National Institutes of Health, VA, and the Suicide Prevention Branch of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Every day 20 veterans, servicemembers, reservists, and members of the National Guard die by suicide, totaling more than 7,300 deaths per year. Despite the fact that funding for VA's veteran suicide prevention programs has increased more than 250 percent since 2005—to \$9.4 billion—the rate of veteran suicide remains relatively unchanged. This constant seems to have VA officials stumped and lawmakers visibly frustrated.

During the hearing, Dr. Richard Stone, Executive in Charge of the Veterans Health Administration, and Dr. Keita Franklin, VA's National Director of Suicide Prevention, outlined a number of recent initiatives to curb suicide. They included:

- Screening every veteran who receives VA services anywhere for suicide risk;
- Training all employees to recognize veterans in crisis and get them the care they need;
- Hiring hundreds more suicide prevention coordinators; and
- Creating a system to flag veteran health records, if they are found to be a suicide risk.

Asked if more funding could help reduce veteran suicides, Dr. Stone told lawmakers, "This is not a financial problem. I can hire another 20,000 mental health providers and the people in the VA will get great care," he said. "This is a problem with the society we live in," adding that the social disconnection of American society is a larger obstacle to reaching veterans at risk than VA

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staffing or funding. “Is this about loneliness, isolation, being disconnected? The answer to all of these is yes,” Stone said.

PVA recently endorsed several pieces of legislation addressing the issue of veteran suicide and mental health care in general. There will be many more and PVA will be tracking these as well as other efforts to combat veteran suicide. VA and HVAC have made suicide prevention their top priority and the Senate is likely to share the same view.

HEARING ON FOREVER GI BILL

On May 9th, the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity held a hearing entitled, “Examining Ongoing Forever GI Bill Implementation Efforts.” Testifying at the hearing was VA’s Under Secretary for Benefits, Dr. Paul Lawrence; VA’s Office of Inspector General (OIG) the Honorable Michael Missal; and Vice President, Chief Technology Officer of the MITRE Corporation, Mr. Jay Schnitzer, MD, Ph.D.

This hearing was held to determine why so many student veterans failed to receive GI Bill payments after the VA implemented the Forever GI Bill. During the implementation, sections of the legislation that specifically addressed housing payments were not correctly implemented; therefore, thousands of veterans did not receive housing payments, creating a hardship on these veterans and forcing many to drop out of school or even become homeless.

During the Fall of 2018, the VA OIG received multiple congressional requests to review VA’s actions to implement the housing allowance provisions and to investigate allegations that VA planned to withhold retroactive payments for missed or underpaid monthly housing stipends for students under the Forever GI Bill. In response to these requests, a VA OIG team began reviewing VA’s implementation of the Forever GI Bill requirements. During this review, Congress passed the Forever GI Bill Housing Payment Fulfillment Act (Public Law 115-422) mandating that VA report to Congress within 90 days on its plan to fully implement certain sections of the Forever GI Bill.

After their review, the VA OIG found that the Veterans Benefits Administration’s (VBA) implementation of the payment of the housing allowances under the Forever GI Bill was hampered by the same underlying issues that have negatively affected VBA’s implementation of other new policies and initiatives—lack of IT system functionality and inadequate program leadership. More specifically, VA lacked a single accountable official to oversee the project which resulted in unclear communications to stakeholders and inadequately defined expectations, roles, and responsibilities of various VA business lines and contractors.

VA testified that veterans who received overpayments would not receive notices since the overpayments were VA’s fault. VA also stated that any veteran who was owed money would be reimbursed. PVA is monitoring this issue very closely and will ensure VA follows through with their promises to fix the problem.

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APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE APPROVES PVA DOL VETS PROPOSAL CAREGIVER PROGRAM FUNDING

On May 8th, the House Appropriations Committee approved a proposal developed by PVA and its allies in the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities Veterans Task Force to establish a Disabled Veteran Program staffer within the Department of Labor's Veterans Employment and Training Service (DOL VETS). In the report accompanying the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill, the committee stated that it was including "\$300,000 within Federal Administration to establish a Disabled Veteran Program (DVP) to address the high unemployment and low labor force participation rate of veterans with service-connected and non-service-connected disabilities." The committee further stated that, "The DVP will help increase employment and advancement opportunities for veterans with disabilities by working with federal, state, and private partners to promote the hiring of veterans with disabilities, improve coordination of available employment services and supports, and to identify and share employment best practices for hiring, retaining, and advancing veterans with disabilities in the workforce."

The overall funding level for VETS was set at \$316 million, an increase of \$16 million above the 2019 enacted level and \$10 million above the President's budget request. In addition to the DVP proposal, the bill included \$60 million for the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program, an increase of \$10 million above the 2019 enacted level and \$29 million for the Transition Assistance Program, an increase of \$6 million above the 2019 enacted level.

The Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill also contained other provisions of importance to PVA members including support for caregiver programs. The full committee included \$5.5 million for Lifespan Respite, which is \$1.39 million above the FY 2019 level and \$200 million for the National Caregiver Support program, which is \$18.8 million above the FY 2019 level. PVA joined with 28 other national organizations in a letter to the appropriators in support of increased funding for these valuable programs.

AUTO ALLIANCE AND AUTONOMOUS VEHICLES

On May 3rd, the Auto Alliance brought together safety advocates, policymakers, and disability advocacy organization to discuss how to make autonomous vehicles more accessible to those with disabilities and older drivers. Lee Page, Senior Associate Advocacy Director, participated on behalf of PVA. The Auto Alliance, the leading advocacy group for the auto industry, represents automakers who build 70 percent of all cars and light trucks sold in the United States. Its members include automakers BMW Group, Fiat Chrysler US LLC, Ford Motor Company, General Motors, Jaguar Land Rover, Mazda, Mercedes-Benz USA, Mitsubishi Motors, Porsche, Toyota, Volkswagen Group of America, and Volvo Car USA.

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Manufacturers continue to move forward in developing driverless autonomous vehicles that can be used for low cost individual transportation. These vehicles must be made accessible for people with disabilities including those who use wheelchairs. The debate at the meeting on May 3rd focused on independent entry and securement for wheelchairs. A wheelchair can be secured in a vehicle by four point tie downs or other securement device and yet the wheelchair occupant is not secure.

Future workshops will explore the actual technologies that can be used for providing increased vehicle accessibility, as well as looking at the broader impacts of expanded mobility. Research shows that a majority of Americans support the use of autonomous vehicles to improve the independence and access for seniors and individuals with disabilities.

COSPONSORS NEEDED FOR AIR CARRIER ACCESS AMENDMENTS ACT (ACAAA)

On April 30th, the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee hosted an afterhours gathering for aviation insiders to mingle with Representatives and their staff members on a less formal basis. Heather Ansley, Associate Executive Director of Government Relations, and Lee Page, Senior Associate Advocacy Director, attended the reception for the second year in a row to get to know legislators and further explain the hardship our members face while flying on commercial airlines.

In response to the difficulties people with disabilities encounter in air travel, the Air Carrier Access Amendments Act (ACAAA) of 2019 (S.669 / HR.1549) was introduced in early March. National Advocacy staff continue to call on Representatives and Senators to gain cosponsors for this PVA priority legislation. PVA chapters and members also need to call on their legislators to inquire about sponsorship.

The ACAAAA would improve access to air travel by: 1) Strengthening ACAA enforcement by requiring referral of certain passenger-filed complaints to the Department of Justice and establishment of a private right of action; 2) Ensuring new airplanes are designed to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities by requiring airlines to meet defined accessibility standards; and 3) Requiring removal of access barriers on existing airplanes to the extent that it is readily achievable – easily accomplishable and may be done without much difficulty or expense.

The current Senate cosponsors are: Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) (Lead Sponsor), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), Maggie Hassan (D-NH), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Ed Markey (D-MA), and Bob Casey (D-PA).

The current House cosponsors are: Jim Langevin (D-RI) (Lead Sponsor), Dina Titus (D-NV), Steve Cohen (D-TN), Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), Jose Serrano (D-NY), Grace Meng (D-NY), Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), Gwen Moore (D-WI), Conor Lamb (D-PA), Raul Grijalva (D-

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AZ), Jim McGovern (D-MA), Chris Pappas (D-NH), Ayanna Pressley (D-MA), Tom Malinowski (D-NJ), and Tom Cole (R-OK) .

HVAC LAUNCHES BIPARTISAN WOMEN VETERANS TASK FORCE

The House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) has launched a new bipartisan Women Veterans Task Force to promote equitable access to VA resources, benefits, and health care for women veterans. The Task Force will be chaired by Congresswoman Julia Brownley (D-CA), who is also the Chairwoman of the HVAC Health Subcommittee.

Women are the fastest growing subpopulation within the military and veterans' communities presently comprising 16 percent of active-duty military forces, 19 percent of National Guard and Reserves, and about 10 percent of all veterans. Women of the newest service eras are taking on unprecedented roles in combat and other positions that expose them to the violence of war and environmental injuries which is likely to increase their utilization of VA's specialized services and rehabilitation programs such as those for post-traumatic stress and other post-deployment behavioral health conditions, traumatic brain injury and polytrauma, amputation, spinal cord injury, and blindness. VA has struggled to keep pace with the growth in women veterans' utilization of health care. The number of women veterans who relied on VA specialized services increased by 175 percent between 2000 and 2015 and last year VA treated more than a half million women (517,241).

After announcing the new Task Force, HVAC's Subcommittee on Health held a hearing focusing on women veterans' access to health care. Patricia M. Hayes, Ph.D. Chief Consultant, Women's Health Services, Patient Care Services, Veterans Health Administration represented VA at the hearing, speaking after a panel of select veterans organizations.

Dr. Hayes acknowledged that the increasing number of women veterans seeking VA care is placing ever-increasing demands on VA, noting they represent nearly 30 percent of new veterans enrolled in VA in recent years. According to Dr. Hayes, every VHA health care system across the United States has at least one full-time Women Veteran's Program Manager. She also spoke about a number of programs and services that VA offers and highlighted two where she believes the Committee could help. Specifically, the need for ongoing help with military sexual trauma and in vitro fertilization (IVF) for married veterans whose inability to conceive is due to a service-connected issue.

PVA was invited to submit a statement for the record and we called on Congress to improve VA's current IVF program, and most important, make it a permanent benefit. We also discussed the lack of mammography services, prosthetics, and peer-to-peer counselors for women

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veterans as well as the need for larger exam rooms in women health clinics and the provision of installed ceiling lifts to facilitate transfers.

This was the first of what we expect will be many hearings examining the current state of women's health care in VA. The Task Force and Subcommittee intend to work together to identify women health care needs and craft a comprehensive bill which committee leadership hopes will receive bipartisan support in the House and Senate.

NEW TEXT FEATURE AVAILABLE THROUGH VA'S WOMEN VETERANS CALL CENTER

VA added a text messaging feature to the Women Veterans Call Center last month. Women veterans can now send text message to 855-829-6636 to receive answers and guidance about VA services. The Women Veterans Call Center is staffed by trained, women VA employees, who can link callers to available resources, such as health care, benefits and cemetery information via phone, chat, and now text.

Since April 2013, the call center has received nearly 83,000 inbound calls and has initiated almost 1.3 million outbound calls. As the number of women veterans continues to grow, VA is expanding its outreach to ensure they receive enrollment and benefits information through means that are user-friendly and responsive. For more information about the Women Veterans Call Center, please visit: <https://www.womenshealth.va.gov/programoverview/wvcc.asp>.

U.S. ACCESS BOARD WEBINAR: ACCESSIBLE PUBLIC RIGHTS-OF-WAY OPEN QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION (JUNE 6TH)

Ensuring that public streets and sidewalks are accessible to people with disabilities can be a challenge, especially since accessibility guidelines for public rights-of-way have yet to be finalized. The next webinar in the U.S. Access Board's free monthly series will take place June 6th from 2:30 – 4:00 (ET) and will be devoted to answering the various questions that come up in addressing access to sidewalks and street crossings, pedestrian signals, on-street parking, roundabouts, transit stops and other components of public rights-of-way as well as shared use paths. Board Accessibility Specialists will answer questions submitted in advance or during the live webinar and offer guidance, solutions, and best practices based on guidelines the Board proposed for public rights-of-way. Attendees are encouraged to submit their questions in advance.

For more information or to register, visit www.accessibilityonline.org. Questions can be submitted in advance of the session (total limited to 25) or can be posed during the live webinar. The webinar series is hosted by the ADA National Network in cooperation with the Board. Archived copies of previous Board webinars are available on the site.