



# Washington Update

Check out the [PVAAction Force](#) page to view our latest alerts and a list of key legislation and its status. veterans and their families through increased benefits, care, and services.

## PACT ACT PASSES THE SENATE

On June 16, the Senate voted 84-14 to pass the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022. Now that the Senate has approved the legislation, it will go back to the House where an earlier version passed 256-174 in March. As a reminder, the PACT Act is a comprehensive legislative package that will deliver all generations of toxic-exposed veterans their long-overdue VA health care and benefits. Some of its provisions would expand VA health care eligibility, improve VA's presumptive process, bolster VA's toxic exposure resources, and strengthen toxic exposure research. Others lay the groundwork for future success by boosting VA claims processing capacity, strengthening VA's workforce, and investing in VA health care facilities. The House is expected to pass the legislation next week.

## Senate Panel Examines VA's FY23 Budget Proposal

On June 14, the Independent Budget (IB) veterans service organizations—DAV, PVA, and VFW—participated in a Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) hearing looking at VA's proposed budget request for Fiscal Year (FY) 2023. The goal of the hearing was to ascertain how the agency's budget aims to better serve

VA Secretary Denis McDonough was the department's only witness. He fielded questions from SVAC members on a wide variety of subjects ranging from funding for the department's community care programs to the pending Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission.

During its portion of the hearing, the IB noted that while our recommendations and the Administration's recommendations for FY 2023 are much closer than they have been in recent years, we continue to differ on the appropriate amount of funding for VA health care. The IB testified about the need for additional projected medical program funding of over \$2.7 billion. These additional funds include the cost to expand and improve services for women veterans, to implement the phase two expansion of VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC), to address the *Beaudette v. McDonough* court ruling regarding the appeal of PCAFC decisions, and the cost to fill at least 33 percent of the Veterans Health Administration's vacant positions.

The IB also stressed that to overcome VA's infrastructure challenges, Congress must not only provide significantly increased funding to address long-standing issues but also enact comprehensive planning,

budgeting, management, and oversight reforms to ensure effective use of those funds. The IB recommended that VA's construction budget be at least three percent of the department's budget to keep up with the backlog of construction projects and even more if it intends for the department to get ahead on infrastructure. A recording of the hearing, which featured testimony from Associate Legislative Director Roscoe Butler, and the IB's written statement can be found [here](#).

### **VA SUSPENDS ANNUAL CAREGIVER PROGRAM REASSESSMENTS**

Recently, the VA [announced](#) it was suspending annual reassessments for participants of the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) while the department continues its review of the program. The action compliments the department's March 22 decision to temporarily stop dismissing veterans from the PCAFC while officials evaluate the program's eligibility rules and the fairness and effectiveness of its assessment tools. Facility Caregiver Support Program staff will however continue to initiate reassessments for veterans and family caregivers for certain purposes, such as when a veteran or caregiver requests to be considered for an increase in stipend level or if there is evidence of an increased need for personal care services. The VA will also continue to conduct wellness visits. Appeal and review options for those who disagree with a PCAFC determination remain the same. To learn more about other steps the VA has taken to improve and enhance the program, please [click here](#).

### **SENATE BUDGET COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN HOLDS HEARING ON SOCIAL SECURITY IMPROVEMENTS**

Senate Budget Committee Chairman Bernie Sanders (I-VT) convened a hearing on June 9 to announce his introduction of the Social Security Expansion Act (S. 4365) and hear from witnesses about the importance of making improvements to Social Security and strengthening its financing. The hearing featured witnesses from Social Security Works, Alliance for

Retired Americans, Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, and the Bipartisan Policy Center.

The focus of the hearing was Senator Sander's legislation that would extend the solvency of Social Security for 75 years by lifting the premium cap (currently payroll taxes are not applied above \$147,000 in annual earnings) and subject all income, including investment income, above \$250,000 to the Social Security payroll tax. A fact sheet issued by his office says that, under this bill, over 93 percent of households would not see any increase in their taxes. The legislation would increase benefits for anyone turning 62 this year and older by \$200 a month and use the Consumer Price Index for the Elderly (CPI-E) as the standard for cost of living increases (COLA). The bill would also update the Special Minimum Benefit so that it is equal to 125 percent of the poverty line and it would restore the student benefit up to age 22 for children of disabled or deceased workers, if the child is a full-time student in a college or vocational school. While several of Senator Sanders' Democratic colleagues spoke positively about his efforts, Republicans on the Committee expressed skepticism about the prospects for the bill. The video of the hearing is available [here](#).

### **CBPP ANALYZES SOCIAL SECURITY TRUSTEES REPORT**

The Social Security Trustees issued their Annual Report on June 2 which indicated that the depletion of the Old Age and Survivors trust fund has been pushed back a year to 2035. An analysis of the report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) highlighted several findings:

- "While most of Social Security's benefits are funded by the payroll taxes collected from today's workers, the program has also accumulated \$2.9 trillion in trust fund reserves over the past three decades. During that period, Social Security's income exceeded its costs, and the program invested the surplus in interest-bearing Treasury securities. Over the next 13 years, those reserves will make up the

difference between Social Security's income and costs.

- After 2035, Social Security could still pay roughly 80 percent of scheduled benefits using its tax income even if policymakers took no steps to shore up the program. Those who claim that Social Security won't be around at all when today's young adults retire and that young workers will receive no benefits either misunderstand or misrepresent the trustees' projections.
- The program's shortfall amounts to 1.1 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) over the next 75 years (and about 1.4 percent of GDP in the 75<sup>th</sup> year)."

CBPP's full analysis can be found [here](#). The 275-page Trustees' report can be found [here](#).

### **GAO SAYS VETERANS FEDERAL CONTRACTOR EMPLOYMENT NEEDS IMPROVEMENT**

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) has issued a report on the performance of the Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) in helping federal contractors comply with affirmative action provisions for veterans protected under the Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act of 1974 (VEVRAA). Approximately 123,000 contractors are covered by VEVRAA and some 5.6 million veterans fall into at least one category protected by the law. PVA was among the veterans groups interviewed by GAO for this report and we shared our concerns that veterans with significant disabilities were being overlooked by government contractors in their recruitment and hiring under VEVRAA as well as Section 503, which applies to contractor employment of people with disabilities. GAO made seven recommendations in its report, including that OFCCP incorporate key practices on employing veterans into its VEVRAA information, clarify hiring benchmarks, and use available data to better approximate the protected veteran population and assess discrimination. The agency had no comments on

these recommendations. The GAO report can be found [here](#).

### **SENATE ISSUES LETTER TO VA TO FIX WEBSITE INACCESSIBILITY**

Senator Bob Casey (D-PA) led a [bipartisan Senate letter](#) to the VA urging the department to improve website accessibility for veterans with disabilities. Website accessibility is required under Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. The VA Website Accessibility Act passed in December 2020, requiring VA to identify inaccessible websites, files, and applications and send a report to Congress on VA's plan to make them accessible.

In September 2021, VA submitted its report to Congress. The report found that only eight percent of VA's internet sites were fully compliant with Section 508. While the Veterans Health Administration provided a detailed remediation timeline, the Veterans Benefits (VBA) and National Cemetery (NCA) Administrations' plans were less than a page long. In the letter, among other things, the lawmakers requested a revised, detailed report from VBA and NCA and for the VA to describe what steps the department is taking or will take to engage groups representing different classes of disabilities. In March 2022, PVA met with Senator Casey's office to discuss website inaccessibility and how it affects PVA members.

### **NEWS OF NOTE**

#### **Accessible Golf and Miniature Golf Facilities Webinar Now Available**

If you missed the U.S. Access Board's webinar on accessible golf and miniature golf facilities earlier this month, you can still access the [webinar recording and presentation materials](#). This webinar reviewed the scoping and technical requirements for accessible golf and miniature golf courses. Board staff also addressed frequently asked questions and common sources of confusion about accessibility at golf and miniature golf facilities. [Archived copies](#) of other Board webinars are also available for viewing.

## WEBINARS AND HEARINGS

### DOT Selects Four Projects to Receive Funds to Improve Transportation Mobility and Access for People with Disabilities

As part of its comprehensive strategy to support accessibility across all modes of transportation for all travelers, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) will provide \$27 million to four projects that will incorporate innovative business partnerships, technologies, and practices to promote independent mobility. The funding supports the implementation of Phases 2 and 3 of the Complete Trip - ITS4US Deployment Program. The program is helping to modernize the nation's transportation system to provide safe, affordable, and equitable access to opportunities and services for all travelers while reducing adverse community impacts. To view the list of projects, [click here](#).

### Self-Service Appointment Check-In Coming to Some VA Facilities

Beginning this summer, some VA facilities will allow veterans to start their check-in process up to seven days in advance of their appointment and/or check in at the clinic using their smartphone on the day of the appointment. Click [here](#) to learn more.

### Reading of the Names

As part of the 40th anniversary commemoration of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, each of the 58,281 names on The Wall will be read between November 7-10, 2022, in Washington, D.C. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Foundation is currently accepting applications from volunteers to support this event. Reader registration will close on August 1 and reading slots will be confirmed by early September. For more information about the Reading of the Names or to sign up for this in-person event, click [here](#).

### U.S. Access Board Webinar: Accessible Residential Facilities

Residential dwelling units are addressed by accessibility guidelines and standards issued under the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Fair Housing Act, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. These laws, guidelines, and standards can be difficult to understand and lead to confusion for many design professionals, lawyers, and citizens. The next webinar in the Board's free monthly series will take place July 7 from 2:30 p.m. – 4:00 p.m. ET and will clarify these laws and their application in the ABA and ADA Accessibility Guidelines for residential facilities.

Presenters from the Board and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) will review differences between Title II and III of the ABA and the ADA, as well as overlaps with HUD's 504 Rehabilitation Act regulations. Additionally, presenters will highlight accessible design and construction requirements under the Fair Housing Act that apply broadly to most multifamily housing. The session will also cover scoping and technical requirements in the ADA and ABA Accessibility Guidelines for work surfaces, turning space, accessible routes, reach ranges, and windows in residential dwelling units.

Visit [AccessibilityOnline](#) for more information or to register.

### Upcoming VA Committee Activities

On June 22 at 10:00 a.m. ET, Associate Legislative Director Julie Howell will testify before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC), Subcommittee on Health about pending legislation, including a bill that would improve access to IVF. To watch the hearing live on the 22nd, [click here](#).

Please visit the HVAC [webpage](#) and the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee [webpage](#) for information on other upcoming hearings and markups.