



# Washington Update

Check out [PVA's new webpage on caregiving](#) and two new advocacy videos that highlight the [concerns in finding quality home care](#) and the [limitations of VA programs](#).

## **HVAC HEALTH SUBCOMMITTEE HOLDS HEARING ON PENDING LEGISLATION**

On March 21, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC), Health Subcommittee held a hearing to examine a dozen bills aimed at improving VA's construction processes, enhance mobility, protect emergency transportation compensation, and authorize VA research in alternative therapies.

PVA's Senior Health Policy Advisor, Roscoe Butler, was one of several witnesses participating in the hearing. During his testimony, he noted that infrastructure is a top priority for PVA. The VA's current number of long-term care beds for veterans with spinal cord injuries and disorders (SCI/D) is woefully inadequate for an aging veteran population with care needs not readily met in the community. As of January, only 169 of VA's 181 SCI/D long-term care beds were actually available, and only one of VA's six specialized long-term care facilities lies west of the Mississippi River. Until construction projects at the Dallas and San Diego VA Medical Centers are completed, only 12 long-term care beds are available for the thousands of SCI/D veterans that reside in this area of the country. Noting that the VA desperately needs to increase its SCI/D long-term care facility capacity, he urged the subcommittee to quickly pass H.R. 3225, the BUILD for Veterans Act.

Another bill reviewed by the subcommittee was H.R. 6373, the Veterans STAND Act. Veterans with SCI/Ds rely heavily on the use of assistive technologies to increase their independence and enhance participation in work, their families, and communities. These range from a simple cane to complex systems that allow the veteran to stand and move at eye level. In recent years, the neuroscience and biomedical communities have made great strides in developing new technologies to help restore mobility for people with SCI/Ds. Many of the newest and more complex technologies are limited to those with specific physical and mental capabilities, amongst other factors. Still, PVA wishes to ensure those who meet the appropriate clinical criteria are considered for emerging assistive technologies.

The STAND Act would first ensure that veterans with SCI/Ds are offered an annual medical exam. These annual assessments are important because it allows the veteran's physician to identify and treat health issues before they worsen; review any changes that have occurred over the last year; and identify risk factors that could lead to future health problems, and offer expert advice on how to mitigate them. Some VA facilities do an excellent job reaching out to SCI/D veterans to offer them an annual assessment, but others do not. The bill also directs the VA to ensure veterans are assessed for and briefed on the types of assistive technologies they may be eligible for during these annual evaluations.



You can watch a recording of the hearing [here](#). Mr. Butler's written statement is available [here](#).

### **HVAC OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE HOLDS HEARING ON PENDING LEGISLATION**

On March 21, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC), Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee [held a hearing](#) to examine a dozen pieces of pending legislation. Representatives from the VA and several veterans service organizations (VSO) were on hand to share their opinions on the bills.

PVA did not participate in the hearing, but provided a letter of support for H.R. 7342, the Veterans Accessibility Advisory Committee Act of 2024, which was one of the bills being reviewed by the subcommittee. This legislation would direct the VA to create an advisory committee on issues relating to the accessibility of VA benefits, services, and facilities for veterans and employees with mobility, hearing, visual, cognitive, or other disabilities.

Despite comprehensive legal requirements, PVA members routinely face accessibility barriers when it comes to accessing care at the VA and within the community. During the hearing, the VA testified that it does not support the legislation, and told lawmakers they believed the objectives of H.R. 7342 could be addressed through the work of existing advisory committees. While it's true the VA has worked to address access barriers for disabled veterans, there is much more work to do. Establishing a Veterans Accessibility Advisory Committee would help ensure the VA is meeting the needs of veterans, by allowing disabled veterans, experts, employees, and VSOs to identify problems and offer solutions via a formal committee whenever the VA is "missing the mark." We believe that the ongoing existence of access barriers points to the need for more focused, collaborative efforts with the VA.

To send a letter to your members of Congress in support of this legislation, please visit [PVAAction Force](#).

### **HVAC DAMA SUBCOMMITTEE HOLDS OVERSIGHT HEARING ON VA CLAIMS**

On March 20, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC), Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) Subcommittee held an oversight hearing focusing on VA's claims and appeals outreach materials. At issue for the subcommittee was the complex, and often confusing, outreach materials sent to veterans when they are filing disability claims and appealing decisions.

In their written testimony, the Board of Veterans' Appeals stated that they have 150 different letters that can be sent to a veteran to notify them of their appeal or provide them with additional information. The Subcommittee Chairman was amazed that one small branch of the VA had so many different letters, and stressed that they are likely too prescriptive and full of unnecessary information that is hard to understand.

Several veterans service organizations (VSO) testified that they have repeatedly engaged with the VA in various forums to improve the language around outreach letters sent to veterans. They all shared similar frustrations that these efforts tend to happen in fits and starts, saying that progress is often hard to achieve.

In an unexpected move, the Subcommittee Chairman asked VA witnesses to exchange contact information with the VSO witnesses in order to work together to address the issues. You can watch a recording of the hearing [here](#).

### **HVAC EO SUBCOMMITTEE HOLDS PENDING LEGISLATION HEARING**

On March 20, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC), Economic Opportunity (EO) Subcommittee, held a hearing on pending legislation. Several pieces of legislation were discussed by the subcommittee and two witness panels comprised of staff from the VA and several veterans service organizations.

Legislation included bills that would increase education benefits for flight schools, allow VA work study students

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to dedicate their time to congressional offices, and offer the VA home loan program to Guard and Reservists. There was also a bill that would allow the VA to disapprove an institution of higher learning from the GI Bill program if they do not offer in-state tuition to student veterans, which is required by law.

One small but impactful bill that was discussed and gained broad support was a bill that seeks to replace the term “employment handicap” with “employment barrier” within the Veteran Readiness and Employment Program (VR&E). PVA supports this legislation and believes that the modernization of the language is aligned with the updating of the program’s title, which until recently was Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment.

You can watch the hearing [here](#).

#### **EO ISSUED ON ADVANCING WOMEN’S HEALTH RESEARCH AND INNOVATION**

On March 18, the President issued an Executive Order (EO) focusing on women’s health research and innovation. Women were excluded from advanced medical research, such as clinical trials until 1993. Before that time, almost all medical research focused on male responses to things like medications and treatment plans.

There are several sections of the EO that cover an array of issue areas aimed to improving research and resources for women’s health. The EO aims to “further integrate women’s health research in federal research programs,” which will build on “research and data standards issued by the National Institutes of Health (NIH).” It also seeks to prioritize federal investments of women’s health research, promote collaborative, interdisciplinary research, address health disparities and inequities, and support the efforts that turn the research into improved health outcomes.

Another section addresses the needs for women in midlife, calling on much needed research to help women understand what their body experiences and needs during aging, a field that lacks scientific research. The

Administration hopes that the order will also provide an opportunity for collaboration among federal funding resources and an assessment of need for additional resources to support such research.

While the EO will focus on federal resources and efforts to understand the complexities of women’s health, it is important to remember that the VA has made concerted efforts over the past few years to focus on women veterans’ health, particularly around aging, and they have made significant progress in support and resources needed for all women veterans. The average age of a woman veteran enrolled at the VA is 65, meaning the support and health care they rely on needs to be not only gender appropriate, but also age appropriate. The EO’s additional support for research will be critical for our women veterans and civilians.

You can read the EO [here](#).

#### **NEWS OF NOTE**

##### **VA, DOD, and FEHRM Roll Out Federal EHR in North Chicago**

On March 9, the VA, the Department of Defense (DOD), and the Federal Electronic Health Record Modernization (FEHRM) office issued a [joint press release](#) announcing they have launched the Federal Electronic Health Record (EHR) at the Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center (Lovell FHCC) in North Chicago, Illinois. This is the first joint deployment of the federal EHR, which DOD calls MHS GENESIS, at a joint VA-DOD facility.

As the only fully integrated, jointly-run VA and DOD health care system in the country, Lovell FHCC provides health care to approximately 75,000 patients each year, including veterans, service members and their families, and Navy recruits. According to the release, the joint deployment ensures that all patients who visit the facility will receive care that is coordinated through a single fully integrated EHR system. It also improves the ability for VA and DOD to coordinate care and share data with each other and the rest of the U.S. health care system.



The launch at Lovell FHCC comes at a time when further launches of the EHR at VA facilities are on hold. VA stopped new implementations at other VA facilities in April 2023 due to problems in rolling out the new system at the five VA sites using the Oracle Cerner EHR.

### Congress Completes FY 2024 Appropriations Process

On March 23, Congress approved legislation to fund the remaining parts of the government, bringing an end to the fiscal year (FY) 2024 appropriations process nearly six months late. The President quickly signed the \$1.2 trillion spending measure which provides funds for the departments of Defense, Homeland Security, Labor, State, Education, Health and Human Services and other legislative priorities, through the end of September. While this bill focuses primarily on the personnel and programs of the Defense Department, it may be beneficial to PVA members as far as research is concerned. The bill provides a total of \$100 million to conduct peer-reviewed research for SCI, ALS, and MS.

### Reminder: Comment Period Open for DOT Proposal on Improving the Air Travel Experience for Wheelchair and Scooter Users

**WHO:** PVA needs you to help us keep #PushingAccessForward.

**WHAT:** Send your comments in response to the U.S. Department of Transportation's (DOT) [proposed changes](#) to the Air Carrier Access Act rules that would improve the air travel experience for wheelchair and scooter users.

**WHEN:** Now until May 13, 2024.

**WHERE:** [Federal Register : Ensuring Safe Accommodations for Air Travelers With Disabilities Using Wheelchairs.](#)

**WHY:** The disability community needs to let the DOT know why better training is needed to stop injuries and wheelchair damage, and why you need your assistive device fixed or replaced as soon as possible if it's damaged or lost.

**HOW:** Leave [comments on the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking \(NPRM\)](#) and post on social media to share stories about your #Flightmares and why air travel must improve for wheelchair and scooter users.

### REMINDER: IRS Piloting Service for Free E-Filing

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) is piloting in 13 states the opportunity to use their free e-file system. This system is intended to make sure that taxpayers are taking advantage of the tax credits, including the [Earned Income Tax Credit](#), and deductions available to them. PVA assisted in testing the accessibility of the website for users with limited or no dexterity. More information, including which states are participating in the pilot, can be found [here](#).

## WEBINARS & HEARINGS

### PVA Voting Webinar Recording Now Available

On March 20, PVA hosted a webinar titled, "Promote the Vote: Voting Rights and Accessibility Requirements." During the webinar, PVA Advocacy Attorney Anthonya James provided an overview of how the Americans with Disabilities Act and other federal laws help ensure fairness throughout the voting process, from voter registration to election day. She also discussed the main barriers to accessibility in the voting process and methods to overcome these barriers.

To view the webinar, please click [here](#).

### Upcoming Veterans' Committee Activities

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

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