



# Washington Update

Check out the [PVAAction Force](#) page to view legislative campaigns and a list of key legislation.

## HVAC ADVANCES KEY BENEFITS AND CAREGIVER BILLS

On February 12, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) agreed to advance an amended version of H.R. 6407, the Sharri Briley and Eric Edmundson Veterans Benefits Expansion Act. Provisions in this important legislation would increase the amount of Special Monthly Compensation (SMC) by \$10,000 annually for the most severely disabled veterans (SMC R1, R2, and T) and raise the rate of Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) by a total of 1.5 percent over a period of two years for the surviving family members of deceased servicemembers and veterans. A previous version of the bill would have raised DIC at a higher rate but was ultimately reduced due to the cost. Also, the committee adopted new language that would make members of the Reserve Component and the National Guard eligible for the VA Home Loan Program. The final vote on the bill largely fell on party lines. Those opposing the bill were concerned about the way in which the benefits increases would be paid for.

Chief Executive Officer Carl Blake released the following statement upon learning about the successful markup session. "Today's markup of the Sharri Briley and Eric Edmundson Veterans Benefits Expansion Act is an important step forward, but momentum must not stall. Catastrophically disabled veterans and their surviving families have waited decades for updated benefits, and they cannot wait any longer." Blake continued, "Outdated benefits leave veterans and surviving families

struggling to meet basic needs, not because they failed, but because the system has failed them. As PVA National Treasurer Tom Wheaton said [in his December testimony before HVAC](#), 'these benefits are not extras; they are lifelines.' We urge House leadership to act quickly to deliver long-overdue relief."

The committee also agreed to advance the Veteran Caregiver Reeducation, Reemployment, and Retirement Act (H.R. 2148) which seeks to provide greater support to caregivers as they separate from the VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC). Currently, the program offers support for family caregivers that are forced to reduce their work hours or leave the workforce entirely to provide care. When their loved one either passes away or returns to independent functioning, caregivers are left with large gaps in their resumes or important certifications in their field have lapsed. Also, those who were relying on the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA) for their health care lose this coverage within 90 days of leaving PCAFC through the death or discharge of the veteran. Users of other insurance programs have 180 days to transition their health insurance benefits.

Provisions in H.R. 2148 extend CHAMPVA health coverage, provide bereavement counseling upon the death of the veteran, and support a caregiver's transition back into the workforce or retirement. The bill also directs studies on the possibility of allowing



caregivers to make contributions to Social Security and examines the possibility of the VA incorporating former caregivers into the VA workforce as personal care attendants. PVA strongly endorses H.R. 2148 and urges the House to pass it quickly.

Finally, beneficiaries of active duty servicemembers often travel far from home to receive care through DOD's TRICARE program. Often their appointments don't end until late in the day which then requires them to drive extended distances home at night. As a result, the committee gave the nod to H.R. 3726, the Fisher House Availability Act of 2025, which would allow VA to provide temporary lodging to a covered beneficiary or a family member of a covered beneficiary on a space available basis.

These bills plus others approved during the markup must now go before the full House for debate and a vote. A recording of the markup session can be viewed [here](#).

### SVAC HOLDS HEARING ON ADAPTIVE SPORTS

On February 4, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) held a hearing titled, "Independent Spirits: Veteran Health and Healing through Adaptive Sports." The hearing was intended to draw attention to adaptive sports available through VA and community organizations.

PVA was invited to testify as a witness before the committee along with two adaptive sports athletes, Gabriel George, the Director of Pickleball for the Military Adaptive Court Sports; and Elizabeth Smith, an adaptive swimmer and Navy veteran. The second panel included Dr. Rachel McArdle, the Deputy Executive Director of Rehabilitation and Prosthetics Service at the Veterans Health Administration.

The hearing was well received by the Senators in attendance, and each witness stressed the value of adaptive sports and the role they can play in a veteran's quality of life and independence.

PVA Associate Legislative Director Julie Howell also

spoke in support of a few pieces of legislation during the hearing. She urged Senators to sign on in support of S. 1726, the ASSIST Act, which is a technical fix to previously passed legislation that unintentionally limited authorized vehicle adaptations through VA's medical benefits package. She also highlighted the need to pass S. 1644, the Autonomy for Disabled Veterans Act, which increases the allowance for the Home Improvements and Structural Alterations grant. The last bill we discussed was S. 3138, the Veterans SPORT Act, which would remove the need for special authorization for a veteran to receive an adaptive device and increase participation in adaptive sports.

The goal of the hearing was to increase awareness of the upcoming Paralympics and to highlight the remarkable disabled veterans that will be participating. You can watch the hearing [here](#).

### HVAC REVIEWS VA'S PLANS TO RESTRUCTURE THE VHA

On February 11, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) held a full committee hearing, "Opportunities with VHA [Veterans Health Administration] Reorganization," to evaluate the VA's plan to drastically change how the Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs) are aligned and staffed. VA Secretary Doug Collins was joined by Under Secretary for Health John Bartrum; Assistant Secretary for HR & Administration Mark Engelbaum; and Acting Chief Operating Officer, VHA, Gregory Goins to answer members' questions.

Referred to as the Restructure for Impact and Sustainability Effort (RISE) this reorganization is aimed at realigning resources and staffing to better reflect how VA needs to deliver care for veterans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. VISNs are being reduced from 18 to 5, while staff and resources will be increased in areas experiencing veteran population growth. Areas with declining demand will be consolidated and staffing will be right sized through attrition.

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

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## SVAC ASSESSES VA'S COMMUNITY CARE NETWORK

On February 11, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) held a full committee hearing focused on, "Building a 21<sup>st</sup> Century VA Health Care System: Assessing the Next Generation of VA's Community Care Network." Richard Topping, VA's Chief Financial Officer, described this contract as being more flexible and responsive to veterans' changing healthcare needs than previous contracts. He also highlighted updates to language governing quality of delivery and contract oversight, which VA says will improve their ability to identify and remediate poor performance. Senators' questions touched on the topics of referrals to the community and concerns about allocation of funds between community care accounts versus direct care system accounts, cultural competency of community providers, continuity of care, and quality of care.

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

## DAMA HOLDS LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON PROPOSED BILLS

On February 3, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) conducted a legislative hearing on bills focused on ensuring veterans and their families can access the VA disability compensation benefits they are eligible for. The nine bills considered during the hearing included two of particular interest to PVA members: H.R. 1685, the Justice for ALS Veterans Act, which would expand eligibility for the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) "kicker" to the surviving spouses of veterans who pass away from service-connected ALS and H.R. 1004, the Love Lives On Act, which would remove the remarriage age for surviving spouses who are receiving DIC. PVA supports both bills. The other pieces of legislation discussed would:

- Require the VA Board of Veterans' Appeals to include in their annual report the reasons why the Board has failed to decide benefits appeals in a timely manner.
- Provide equity between all veterans who are seeking transportation and private burial plot reimbursements from the VA.

- Require the National Cemetery Administration to publish an annual report, like those published by other VA administrations.
- Initiate the expansion of the Dayton National Cemetery, acquiring nearby land at no charge to the federal government.
- Require consideration of changes to the way VA identifies fraudulent disability benefits questionnaires and the evidentiary standard for determining if some conditions are service connected.

To read PVA's testimony, click [here](#). To watch the hearing, click [here](#).

## SEVERAL VETERANS BILLS CLEAR THE HOUSE

In recent weeks, the House has passed several pieces of veterans legislation, many of which are supported by PVA. All the bills cleared by the House now face an uphill climb to clear the Senate.

- H.R. 3123, the Ernest Peltz Accrued Veterans Benefits Act, would allow the VA to award entitlement to accrued pension benefits to the surviving family members of veterans who were awarded entitlement but died before the benefit was paid.
- H.R. 685 would establish eligibility requirements for the appointment of an individual in the Veterans Health Administration as a marriage and family therapist.
- H.R. 980, the Veterans Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Improvement Act, would approve non-degree flight training for certain veterans, establish a dedicated telephone number in the Education Call Center for VR&E participants, as well as create an annual VR&E report.
- H.R. 1458, the Veterans Education and Technical Skills (VETS) Opportunity Act of 2025, would help protect student veterans from predatory schools and empower the VA to disapprove programs that serve no benefit to veterans.

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## CONGRESS HOLDS HEARINGS TO CONSIDER AV LEGISLATION AND POLICY

Recent congressional hearings have highlighted the interest in the development and deployment of autonomous vehicles (AVs). On January 13, the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Subcommittee on Commerce Manufacturing, and Trade held a hearing titled, "[Examining Legislative Options to Strengthen Motor Vehicle Safety, Ensure Consumer Choice and Affordability, and Cement U.S. Automotive Leadership.](#)" This hearing addressed motor vehicle safety, including the deployment of AVs, through discussion of various legislative proposals. The bipartisan SELF DRIVE Act discussion draft covers laws and regulations related to the design, construction, and performance of automated driving systems by encouraging the testing and deployment of AVs. Another draft bill, the Motor Vehicle Modernization Act, includes research on independent wheelchair securement options. PVA submitted a letter for the record through the Consortium for Constituents with Disabilities (CCD) Transportation Task Force regarding the need to ensure the availability of wheelchair accessible AVs.

On February 4, the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation held a hearing on the topic of AVs titled, "[Hit the Road, Mac: The Future of Self-Driving Cars,](#)" to specifically address the need for federal laws and regulations to govern AVs.

Witnesses from Tesla, Waymo, and the Autonomous Vehicle Industry Association reiterated that national standards are necessary for AVs to be safely and widely deployed. There was also discussion on how AVs can provide transportation options for people with disabilities. However, Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) questioned witnesses on the lack of wheelchair accessible AVs. PVA also submitted a letter for the record through the CCD Transportation Task Force for this hearing.

## NEW PUBLICATION LAYS OUT SUGGESTED WOMEN VETERANS' HEALTH RESEARCH AGENDA

A new research paper has been published titled, "Results of a Multistep Approach to Setting Research Priorities to Improve Women Veterans' Health: Updated VA Women's Health Research Agenda." The Women's Health Research Network (WHRN) is a national resource that offers technical guidance, mentorship, and research development for high-priority research topics related to women veterans for other VA researchers and department leadership. The WHRN also engages with women veterans through various methods to increase direct participation and feedback from women veterans.

In the new paper, the WHRN identified 14 research priorities, including mental health, rural access to health care, primary care, preventative care, reproductive health, and other topics like complex chronic conditions, aging, and long-term care options. This paper builds off the research framework established in 2011 and highlights the priorities of women veterans.

Dr. Elizabeth Yano, Ph.D., is a coauthor of the publication and the Director of the WHRN. Dr. Yano is a clinical researcher who works with UCLA and the VA. She joined PVA at the 2025 Women Veterans Empowerment Retreat (WVER). Participants at last year's WVER were able to provide feedback that contributed to the research in the final publication.

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

## NEWS OF NOTE

### VA Announces Recruitment of More Than 300 VR&E Staff

In early February, VA announced a concerted hiring effort to recruit more than 300 vocational rehabilitation counselors and specialists for the Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program. The current caseload for VR&E counselors is estimated to be around 200 veterans for each VR&E counselor, despite the regulations suggesting no more than 125 veterans per counselor. This hiring effort will hopefully fill critical positions

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necessary for the timely delivery of benefits for disabled veterans. The VR&E program is a priority for PVA, and we will continue to work with the program to ensure that disabled veterans are able to find suitable and meaningful employment. You can read the press release [here](#).

### VA Releases Suicide Prevention Report

Recently, VA released the [2025 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report](#), which analyzes veteran suicide from 2001 to 2023, the most recent year for which data is available. The report shows a slight drop in veteran suicides, with most veteran suicides occurring among veterans not receiving care through the VA. For veterans utilizing VA care, the most frequently identified risk factor for suicide was pain.

The Veterans Crisis Line can assist veterans in need of support. Dial 988 then press 1. Or Text 838255.

### WEBINARS, SURVEYS, AND COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES

#### FINAL REMINDER Webinar: Driving Change in 2026: Inside PVA's Annual Testimony

Join us on February 19 at 2:00 p.m. ET as we prepare for PVA's annual testimony before a joint session of the Veterans Affairs' Committees to learn about our 2026 PVA Policy Priorities. Start off with a warm welcome from PVA National President Robert Thomas, followed by a breakdown of the priorities important to our members. Find out ways you can get involved and help push our priorities forward.

To register, please click [here](#).

#### Webinar: Accessibility of Federal Facilities—An Overview of the ABA

Join us on March 19 at 2:00 p.m. ET as we explore accessibility under the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA). Travis Saner, Accessibility Specialist, U.S. Access Board will discuss the essentials of federal facility accessibility under the ABA, from entrances and signage to restrooms and assembly areas.

To register, please click [here](#).

#### FINAL REMINDER: Survey for Project Focused on Improving the Airport Journey of Wheelchair Users

InterVISTAS is currently collaborating with Indiana University – Bloomington (IUB) to collect information on the air travel experiences of people with disabilities. Funded by the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, this project strives to identify ways to enhance the air travel experiences of individuals using wheelchairs. PVA is a member of the panel overseeing this project.

How to Participate:

1. Register: Please first [complete the screening survey](#). This will only take 5 minutes.
2. Survey: Once registered, eligible participants (those aged 18 or older, living with a disability that requires the use of a wheelchair, and currently residing in the U.S.) will receive a link to the full online survey.

Please contact the research team with questions at [travelX@iu.edu](mailto:travelX@iu.edu) or 812-855-9037. The survey will close once researchers have reached the target number of completed responses.

#### Veterans' Committee Activities

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