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Washington Update

Follow the Status of PVA's Priority Issues Between Updates! Visit the [PVAction Force](#) page to view our latest alerts and a list of key legislation and its status.

PVA's 2022 POLICY PRIORITIES

We recently released PVA's veterans and disability policy priorities for 2022. Our priorities reflect the need for paralyzed veterans to have access to high-quality, comprehensive health care and timely, accurate delivery of all earned benefits. They must also have equity of access to the opportunities and freedoms available to all Americans. The list of priorities for this year are as follows:

- Protect Access to VA's Specialized Health Care Services (System Access, Staffing, and Infrastructure)
- Expand Access to VA Long-Term Services and Supports (Facility-Based Long-Term Care and Home and Community-Based Services and Caregiver Supports)
- Improve VA Health Care Services and Benefits for Catastrophically Disabled Veterans and their Survivors (Assisted Reproductive Technologies, Survivor Benefits, Adapted Automobile Benefits, and Home Modification Grants)

- Increase Access to VA Health Care and Benefits for Women Veterans with SCI/D
- Protect the Civil Rights of People with Disabilities (Access to Air Travel and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Compliance)
- Strengthen and Enhance Social Security Benefits
- Increase Employment Prospects for Veterans with Disabilities

To learn more about our priorities, please click [here](#).

AMTRAK PAYS OVER \$2 MILLION TO INDIVIDUALS IN DISABILITY SETTLEMENT

The Department of Justice recently announced that Amtrak paid over \$2 million to more than 1,500 individuals who experienced disability discrimination while traveling or attempting to travel by train. The payments were part of a comprehensive [settlement agreement](#) reached on December 2, 2020, to resolve the United States' determination that Amtrak failed for over a decade to make existing stations in its intercity rail transportation system

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accessible to people with disabilities, including those who use wheelchairs, as required by the ADA. The payments follow a year-long process to identify victims of that discrimination.

The December 2020 agreement requires Amtrak to make its intercity rail system accessible, prioritizing stations with the most significant barriers to access. In the next nine years, Amtrak is required to complete designs to make at least 135 of its existing stations accessible, complete construction at 90 of those stations, and begin construction at 45 more. Amtrak will also train staff on ADA requirements and implement an improved process for accepting and handling ADA complaints. Amtrak recently established an Office of the Vice President of Stations, Properties and Accessibility to coordinate its compliance with the ADA.

For individual questions about the compensation fund, please [contact the Fund Administrator](#).

JUSTICE FOR ALS VETERANS ACT INTRODUCED IN THE SENATE

Legislation to increase VA Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) for the survivors of veterans who die from ALS was introduced in the Senate on January 12. The Justice for ALS Veterans Act, S. 3483, is identical to legislation introduced in the House last fall (H.R. 5607). Both measures would allow future survivors of veterans who die from ALS to qualify for the DIC kicker which is an additional \$305.28 per month of DIC. We thank Senators Chris Coons (D-DE) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) for introducing this important legislation and urge Congress to pass it quickly. PVA members are encouraged to [contact](#) their elected officials to urge them to support these bills.

CHAIRMAN OF HSGAC INTRODUCES CIVIL RIGHTS BILL FOR FEMA

On January 13, Chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee (HSGAC), Gary Peters (D-MI), and Senator Alex Padilla (D-CA) introduced S. 3502, the Achieving Equity in Disaster Response, Recovery, and Resilience Act. The bill would establish an Office of Civil Rights, Equity, and Community Inclusion at the

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to improve underserved community access to disaster assistance; improve the quality of disaster assistance received by underserved communities; and eliminate racial, ethnic, and other underserved community disparities in the delivery of disaster assistance. It would create within that office the position of Disability Coordinator “to ensure that the needs of individuals with disabilities are being properly addressed by proactively engaging with disability and underserved communities and state, local, and tribal governments in emergency preparedness and disaster relief.” Among the responsibilities of the Disability Coordinator would be to provide guidance and coordination on disability-related issues in emergency planning requirements and relief efforts, consult with disability community stakeholders about the needs of individuals with disabilities in disasters, coordinate and disseminate best practices and model evacuation plans and sheltering for individuals with disabilities, and ensure that training materials and curricula provided to state and local governments address the needs of people with disabilities.

WHITE HOUSE OFFICE OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT DISABILITY STAKEHOLDER CALL FOCUSES ON COVID-19 TEST AND MASK DISTRIBUTION

In its monthly disability community stakeholder call on January 20, the White House Office of Public Engagement reported on the announcement that the federal government had begun making available 500 million of an eventual 1 billion free COVID-19 at-home test kits. Those interested in obtaining a kit can do so by going to [COVIDTest.gov](#) or, for those without internet access, by calling 1-800-232-0233. Also, a plan to distribute 400 million N95 masks through neighborhood pharmacies should be fully operational by the beginning of February.

Featured on the call was Alison Barkoff, Principal Deputy Administrator, Administration for Community Living (ACL), who reported on ACL’s hotline, the [Disability Information and Assistance Line \(DIAL\)](#). DIAL is an additional resource, connecting people with disabilities to COVID-19 vaccination and testing in their communities. DIAL support can





be reached by calling 888-677-1199 or by emailing DIAL@USAgingandDisability.org.

The call also featured information about the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). LIHEAP is a federally funded program that helps low-income households pay their home heating and cooling bills. It operates in every state and the District of Columbia, as well as within most tribal reservations and U.S. territories. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, LIHEAP agencies across the country have made necessary changes to their typical operations to accommodate the circumstances caused by the pandemic. To apply for LIHEAP or to learn more, call 1-877-674-6327 or email EnergyAssistance@ncat.org.

HOUSE PASSES EVEST ACT

The House of Representatives recently passed H.R. 4673, the Ensuring Veterans' Smooth Transition (EVEST) Act, which directs VA to automatically enroll eligible servicemembers in VA health care. Automatically enrolling eligible servicemembers in VA health care simplifies their transition out of the military and may also help prevent veteran suicide. You can see full bill text [here](#).

NEWS OF NOTE

VA Delays Electronic Health Record Deployment in Ohio Due to COVID-19 Surge

On January 14, VA [announced](#) it is delaying the scheduled deployment of its new electronic health record effort at the VA Central Ohio Healthcare System in response to a surge in COVID-19 cases affecting the workforce and community.

Family B&B Provider Consolidation and Standardization

VA Central Office is standardizing and centralizing VA's Bowel and Bladder (B&B) payment process. A Regional Payment Center has been established in Vancouver, Washington, (VISN 20), and will be responsible for processing all claims for B&B payments. Consolidation began in March 2021 and is expected to be completed by February 1, 2022.

Once completed, all claims for B&B payment must be faxed to the Regional Payment Center.

Questions concerning this process can be directed to your local VA Office of Community Care or contact your PVA National Service Officer.

Annie App for Veterans

The Annie App for Veterans is a VA service that sends automated text messages to veterans to help them stay focused on their self-care. Annie can help with the following and many more health conditions.

- COVID-19 precautions
- Diabetes
- General Wellness
- Mental Health
- Hypertension

[Learn more and sign up](#) by health topic for the Annie protocols you need by subscribing with your mobile phone. You can access training materials [here](#).

VA Automated Benefits Delivery System Pilot

VA is testing a new, automated system that may help the department accelerate decisions on disability claims and decrease its backlog of claims applications. According to the department, its new VA Automated Benefits Delivery System, launched in December, is processing claims within a day or two, while the traditional method of processing these claims currently takes 100 days or more. The pilot is currently focused on claims related to service-related hypertension, and processing claims through the agency's Boise Regional Office. Click [here](#) to read more.

HEARINGS AND SURVEYS

Hazardous Exposures Survey

Over the past year, Congress has been working on legislation that would expand VA benefits and services to veterans who were exposed to hazardous substances during their military service. As part of this ongoing effort, the House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC) is inviting veterans who

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are living with the effects of service-related toxic exposures to participate in this [survey](#). Responses of participants will help support the Committee's efforts to advance this important legislation.

Survivors and Dependents Survey

HVAC has established a survey to learn more about the experience of survivors and dependents with VA benefits in preparation for an upcoming hearing. To provide feedback, please click [here](#).

Upcoming Hearings

For the latest VA hearings, please visit the [House](#) and [Senate](#) Committee pages.