



# Washington Update

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

Written and produced by Paralyzed Veterans of America - Government Relations Department

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## **GAO RELEASES REPORT ON AIRPORT ACCESSIBILITY**

Air travel for people with disabilities can be very challenging for a variety of reasons, including access problems at airports. In our nation's airports, people with disabilities can face infrastructure, information, and customer service barriers. For example, complex terminal layouts and long distances between gates can be hard to navigate. Additionally, travel information is not always available in a format that is accessible to all.

According to stakeholders, while no solution meets all needs, a number of practices can help reduce or eliminate some of these barriers to equal access at airports. For example, some selected airports use external disability community and passenger groups to proactively engage in identifying barriers and developing solutions. Other airports have implemented technology-based solutions, such as mobile phone applications to make airport navigation easier.

The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018 included a requirement for the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to review leading airport accessibility practices for passengers with disabilities, as well as required training for airline and contract service personnel who assist these passengers throughout the airport. Earlier this month, GAO released the report, [Passengers with Disabilities: Airport Accessibility Barriers and Practices and DOT's Oversight of Airlines' Disability-Related Training](#). The report includes an examination of stakeholder-identified barriers that passengers with disabilities face when accessing airport facilities, accessibility practices to assist passengers with disabilities, and the efficacy of the Department of Transportation's (DOT) oversight of airlines' disability-related training.

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As part of its review, GAO examined relevant federal laws, regulations, DOT documents, literature, as well as information describing disability training provided by selected airlines and contractors. GAO also interviewed a sample of stakeholders, including those at 16 U.S. airports selected based on size and geography, eight large and low-cost domestic airlines selected based on the greatest number of disability-related passenger complaints and enplanements, and six aviation service contractors working for those airlines. GAO also conducted interviews with DOT officials and 10 disability advocacy organizations, including PVA.

## SENATE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE LEGISLATIVE HEARING

On April 28, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee held a legislative hearing on 23 pieces of legislation, many of which focused on providing help for veterans suffering from exposure to toxic substances. PVA submitted a written statement for the record. The main focus of our testimony was the AUTO for Veterans Act (H.R. 1361/S. 444), which would provide a new automobile allowance for eligible service-connected veterans every ten years. Another bill highlighted by PVA was the Aid and Attendance Support Act of 2021 (S. 219), which would provide a temporary increase in special monthly compensation/aid and attendance for veterans due to increased out of pocket costs for these services during the pandemic. You can watch the hearing [here](#).

## ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY BILL INTRODUCED

Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) and Representative Rick Larsen (D-WA) have introduced legislation, the Veteran Families Health Services Act, [H.R. 2734](#) and [S. 1280](#), in the House and Senate aimed at improving assisted reproductive technology for servicemembers and veterans. This legislation would allow servicemembers to cryopreserve their gametes before deployment to a combat zone or hazardous duty assignment as well as after an injury or illness; permanently authorize fertility treatment and counseling, including assisted reproductive technology like IVF, for veterans and servicemembers and allow for the use of donated gametes; ensure that veterans' and servicemembers' spouses, partners, and gestational surrogates are appropriately included in eligibility rules; provide support for servicemembers and veterans to navigate their options, find a provider that meets their needs, and ensure continuity of care after a permanent change of station or relocation; expand options for veterans with infertility by allowing VA to provide adoption assistance; and require VA and the Department of Defense (DOD) to facilitate research on the long-term reproductive health needs of veterans. PVA supports this legislation because it will greatly improve the treatment of infertility within DOD and VA. We encourage you to ask your members of Congress to support this legislation by clicking [here](#).

## PVA PARTICIPATES IN CONGRESSIONAL ROUND TABLE ON ENDING HARASSMENT AT VA

On April 21, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs held a closed full committee round table

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with 10 veterans service organizations about eliminating sexual harassment at VA. PVA Associate Legislative Director Maureen Elias and PVA National Vice President Tammy Jones represented PVA at the round table. House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano's (D-CA) remarks on the round table are available [here](#).

## **PRESIDENT BIDEN'S AMERICAN JOBS PLAN WOULD PROVIDE FUNDING FOR VA INFRASTRUCTURE**

In mid-April, PVA staff participated in a meeting with the White House to learn more about veteran-related provisions in President Biden's American Jobs Plan. The areas of focus for veterans include modernization of VA facilities, creation of quality jobs for veterans and spouses, and expansion of opportunities for small veteran-owned businesses. With regard to VA facilities, the plan would provide \$18 billion to address infrastructure needs. Of that amount, \$3 billion would be available to address immediate infrastructure needs and \$15 billion would be available to replace outdated VA Medical Centers. More information about the plan's implications for veterans is available [here](#).

## **NEWS ITEMS OF NOTE**

- House Natural Resources Subcommittee Holds Hearing on Accessibility in National Parks

On April 27, the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations held a virtual, fully remote oversight hearing titled, "[Accessibility for People with Disabilities on National Parks and Public Lands](#)." The Subcommittee heard testimony from witnesses, including a disabled veteran, about their personal experiences and the importance of access to public lands in order to maintain health and recreation. Accessibility in the national parks allows people with disabilities the opportunity to interact with nature in an integrated setting. PVA is concerned about accessibility barriers in local, state, and national parks and provided background information for the hearing.

- Legislation Introduced to Help Military Families with Disabilities with Housing Access Issues

PVA has endorsed the Protecting Military Families with Disabilities Act (H.R. 2378), which was introduced by Representatives Stephanie Bice (R-OK) and Sara Jacobs (D-CA) to protect servicemembers and their families from being charged out-of-pocket costs for needed disability access upgrades to their military base housing. Representative Bice developed the bill in the wake of reports that military families were being charged by private military housing contractors for reasonable and needed upgrades or modifications to their on-base housing unit in order to accommodate the needs of a family member with a disability. The bill clarifies provisions in Title 10 that families living in private military housing cannot be charged any amount in addition to rent for needed

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accessibility upgrades to their home. The legislation is currently pending in the House Armed Services Committee.

- Nominee Named for Assistant Secretary of Disability Employment Policy, Department of Labor

On April 16, President Biden nominated Taryn Mackenzie Williams to become the next Assistant Secretary of Disability Employment Policy at the Department of Labor (DOL). Williams is the managing director for the Poverty to Prosperity Program at the Center for American Progress. Before joining the Center for American Progress, Williams worked as chief of staff at DOL's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) where she worked on a variety of issues related to education, workforce policy, Social Security, Medicaid, and civil rights. She also served on detail assignments as associate director for public engagement and liaison to the disability community at the White House from 2014 through 2015 and as a policy advisor on the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions from 2012 through 2013. She holds a bachelor's degree in public policy from Brown University and a master's degree in education with a concentration in administration, planning, and social policy from Harvard University.

- DOL Online Dialogue About Equity in Employment Deadline Extended to May 3

Advocates are invited to share their ideas for promoting equity in employment by [joining a national online dialogue](#) hosted by the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) Office of Disability Employment Policy, Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, and Women's Bureau. Interested parties are encouraged to tell policymakers how DOL can promote racial and social equity in employment policies and programs for people with disabilities. The aim of the dialogue is to help inform DOL's efforts to remove barriers to opportunity for people with disabilities and ensure access to good jobs. DOL is particularly interested in learning more about:

- Challenges faced by workers and jobseekers with disabilities.
- Ways to reach jobseekers and employees with disabilities in underserved communities.
- Examples of programs or policies that advance racial and social equity in employment.
- Methods for providing assistance to employers, workers and other stakeholders.

Join this important conversation any time between now and May 3 by visiting the [online dialogue site](#).

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## HEARINGS/EVENTS

- On April 16, the World War I Centennial Commission celebrated the Inaugural Raising of the U.S. flag over the newly constructed National World War I Memorial site in Washington, DC. The First Colors Ceremony is designed to “bring our history home.” It began with an American flag that first flew over the United States Capitol on April 6, 2017, commemorating the Centennial of the United States entry into World War I. The commemorative flag was then flown over the American World War I battlefield cemeteries of Europe and the WWI Museum in Kansas City, to honor the 116,516 individuals who gave the last full measure of devotion. The flag has returned home to its final destination in Washington, DC, where it will fly above the National World War I Memorial. The trip this commemorative flag made recalls the epic journey to Europe by the legendary Doughboys, honors those who made the ultimate sacrifice on the fields of battle, and again rejoices with their triumphant return home. The ceremony is available for viewing [here](#).
- On April 21, the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations held a legislative hearing. PVA submitted a statement for the record. The hearing is available for viewing [here](#).