



# 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

May 27, 2021

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**Want to Follow the Status of Priority Issues Between Updates?**  
Visit [PVA's VoterVoice Portal](#) to view our latest alerts and a list of key legislation and its status.

## **PVA Testifying in Congressional Hearings Today!**

- On May 27 at 11:00 am ET, the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress will hold a hearing entitled, "Making the House More Accessible to the Disability Community." Heather Ansley, Associate Executive Director of Government Relations, will testify on behalf of PVA. To watch the hearing live, please click [here](#).
- On May 27 at 2:30 pm ET, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) will hold a hearing entitled, "Investing in a Better VA: Examining the Role of Infrastructure in Veterans' Access to Care and Benefits." The Independent Budget Veterans Service Organizations—DAV, PVA, and VFW—will testify at the hearing. National Legislative Director Morgan Brown will participate on behalf of PVA. To watch the hearing live, please click [here](#).

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## **ADDITIONAL AUTOMOBILE ALLOWANCE LEGISLATION INTRODUCED**

On May 19, Rep. Lizzie Fletcher (D-TX) and HVAC Chairman Mark Takano (D-CA) introduced the Care Access Resources (CARS) for Vets Act (H.R. 3304). This legislation would allow eligible service-connected veterans to receive an additional automobile grant if ten years have lapsed since their last grant. This legislation would also codify the provision of certain vehicle modification for veterans with non-service-connected qualifying conditions. More information about the CARS legislation is available [here](#). PVA supports both the CARS for Vets Act and the previously introduced AUTO for Veterans Act (H.R. 1361/S. 444).

### **Paralyzed Veterans of America**

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## HOUSE PASSES VETERANS-RELATED LEGISLATION

The House recently passed [10 bills](#) to make VA benefits and services more accessible and improve overall management of the Department. While PVA supported many of the bills during hearings earlier this year, two of them stood out as being of particular interest. First, over the past year, VA has received large sums of money from multiple COVID-related legislative packages to combat the virus and deliver health care and benefits for veterans. Passage of H.R. 2911, the VA Transparency and Trust Act of 2021, would help Congress keep better track of how this money is being spent. Second, H.R. 2494 would create a new administration within VA to oversee the agency's education, training, employment, and other programs focused on helping veterans in the transition to civilian life. The new Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration would be headed by an Under Secretary for Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition. Programs like Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) and Specially Adaptive Housing (SAH) would likely receive a higher level of visibility under the new administration. In turn, this would lead to stronger oversight and accountability for the delivery of services and benefits. PVA also believes it would help to foster the innovation needed to ensure that the delivery of these benefits and services are modernized, and allow for focused collaboration with other agencies and programs, including the Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service.

## SVAC HEARING REVIEWS GROWING BACKLOG OF VA CLAIMS AND EXAMS

The pandemic's impact on the VA claims process has been unfortunate and significant. Prior to COVID-19, there were roughly 140,000 pending VA exam requests with an average of 21 days to completion and about 70,000 claims pending over 125 days. As of May 8, there were over 350,000 pending compensation and pension (C&P) exam requests with an average 90 days to completion and 191,647 of 526,616 pending claims over 125 days.

During a recent hearing, Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) members urged VA to keep its focus on disabled veterans as the Department works to reduce large, COVID-related backlogs of pending C&P exams, disability claims and appeals. SVAC received testimony from VA, the Government Accountability Office, and veterans service organizations on other ways the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) could make the disability claims process quicker and more veterans-focused. In a statement for the record, PVA told lawmakers that Veterans Health Administration examiners should be used to provide C&P exams for veterans with complex claims. This would greatly reduce errors and ensure VBA obtains everything it needs during the initial examination. We felt the claims backlog could be reduced even further by increasing the use of the informal hearing option to address some of the evidentiary claims with merits. The hearing was recorded and can be viewed [here](#).

## REMINDER: AMTRAK SETTLEMENT FUND CLAIMS MUST BE FILED BY MAY 29

Amtrak has entered into a Settlement Agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice to resolve a lawsuit brought under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). If you were harmed by

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Amtrak's lack of accessible transportation services between **July 27, 2013, and December 2, 2020**, you may be eligible to receive payment from a compensation fund established by Amtrak.

**Claims must be submitted by May 29, 2021.** Information about how to submit a claim is available in several ways: (1) by visiting [www.AmtrakDisabilitySettlement.com](http://www.AmtrakDisabilitySettlement.com) (2) by sending an email with your name, address, and telephone number to [info@AmtrakDisabilitySettlement.com](mailto:info@AmtrakDisabilitySettlement.com), or (3) by calling the Fund Administrator at (888) 334-6165 or TTY: (866) 411-6976.

To receive payment, an individual with a disability must have had problems accessing one of 78 stations. The list of stations is available at <http://www.AmtrakDisabilitySettlement.com>. If you have any questions, please contact Lee Page, Senior Associate Advocacy Director, at [Leep@pva.org](mailto:Leep@pva.org).

## **SENATOR DUCKWORTH INTRODUCES BILL TO MAKE LEGACY TRANSIT ACCESSIBLE**

On May 18, Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) introduced the All Stations Accessibility Program Act of 2021 or the ASAP Act (S.1680) with cosponsors Sherrod Brown (D-OH) and Bob Casey (D-PA). This measure would provide competitive grants to assist state and local governmental authorities in addressing the disability access needs of legacy rail fixed guideway public transportation systems. Specifically, the Secretary of Transportation would make grants to assist eligible entities in financing capital projects to upgrade the accessibility of legacy rail fixed guideway public transportation systems by increasing the number of existing rail stations that meet the new construction standards of Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. With the appropriated funds that the ASAP Act would allocate on an annual basis, this measure would enable legacy transit systems to maximize access for people with disabilities.

Transit facilities, intermodal centers, rail stations, and platforms must meet accessibility standards established by the U.S. Department of Transportation. The requirements apply to new construction as well as alterations made to existing facilities and include the following: accessible paths of travel, boarding ramps and bridge plates, bus stops and shelters, curb ramps, doors, elevators, escalators, emergency alarms, fare collection, gates and turnstiles, grade crossings, parking, passenger drop-off areas, platforms edges, rescue assistance areas, and restrooms, signs, stairs, public telephones, water fountains, with wheelchair spaces.

PVA supports this legislation because it would improve access to public transportation options for people with disabilities, including those who use assistive devices for mobility.

## **NEWS ITEMS OF NOTE**

- Congressional Supporters Urge Doubling in Funding for Lifespan Respite in FY 2022

On April 28, a bipartisan group of members of the House of Representatives sent a [letter](#) to the House Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations Subcommittee requesting \$14.2 million for the Lifespan Respite Care Program in Fiscal Year (FY) 2022. This amount reflects the

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President's budget recommendation to double funding for the program. The letter was spearheaded by Rep. Jim Langevin (D-RI) and Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA).

- New Hotel in WV Offers All Accessible Rooms

On January 1, 2022, a new boutique hotel will open in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, featuring 28 guest rooms and two suites. The project is being financed by The Disability Opportunity Fund (DOF), a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI). Charles Hammerman, DOF CEO, said that White Sulphur Springs came to his attention after two area moms called his office, searching for work opportunities for their disabled children.

In keeping with its focus on the disability market, DOF has committed to making The Schoolhouse Hotel fully accessible. When it opens next year, it will be the world's first hotel where every room is adapted for use by disabled people. Full accessibility, universal design and an accessible booking experience that matches customers to the room that will best meet their needs are priorities that DOF hopes to normalize. To learn more about The Schoolhouse Hotel, click [here](#).

- Administration Releases Fact Sheet on Efforts to Support Full Participation and Equality for People with Disabilities

Recently, the Biden-Harris Administration released a fact sheet detailing steps taken to achieve a more inclusive country for people with disabilities. For a full list of the Administration's efforts affecting people with disabilities, click [here](#).

- Month of the Military Caregiver

Military Caregiver Month is observed in May each year to honor more than five million caregivers in the U.S. who care for more than two million veterans. Information about this observance can be found [here](#). For caregiver resources, please visit the Elizabeth Dole Foundation's [HiddenHeroes.org](#) and [Nine Steps to Respite for Military and Veteran Caregivers](#).

- ADA National Network Resource – The ADA and Caregivers: Frequently Asked Questions

A new fact sheet from the ADA National Network addresses some of the most frequently asked questions the ADA Centers receive from caregivers and personal assistants. To view the fact sheet, please click [here](#).

- NDEAM 2021 Theme: America's Recovery: Powered by Inclusion

On May 14, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) announced that the theme for National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) 2021 is "America's Recovery: Powered by Inclusion." Held each October, the commemoration raises awareness about disability employment issues, and celebrates the many and varied contributions of America's workers with disabilities. Selected by DOL's Office of Disability Employment

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Policy (ODEP), the spring announcement of the NDEAM theme is meant to assist disability advocates, employers, and other organizations in planning their observances. As ODEP celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2021, it encourages employers and community organizations, advocacy groups, and schools to participate. More information is available [here](#).

## HEARINGS/SURVEYS/WEBINARS

- Upcoming PVA Webinar: Veterans and Social Security Disability Insurance

On June 17 from 2:00-3:00 pm ET, PVA Government Relations will host a webinar on Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). SSDI is an important benefit for which most veterans with catastrophic disabilities will qualify. However, many veterans and their families have misconceptions about this Social Security Administration (SSA) program and may be unfamiliar with SSA's efforts to serve veterans with disabilities. ML Jordan, Jr., Supervisory Social Insurance Specialist with SSA's Division of Strategic Communications, will join PVA Advocacy staff to offer an overview of the SSDI program and its benefits, discuss some common myths surrounding receipt of VA and Social Security benefits, outline SSA's Wounded Warrior/VA Permanent and Total claims process, and share ways that SSA is reaching out to the veteran community.

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

- HVAC Committee Hearing on Employment

On May 26, HVAC, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity held a hearing entitled, "Veteran Employment Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic." PVA provided a statement for the record focused on the employment of veterans with catastrophic disabilities. To view the hearing recording, please click [here](#).

- Survey: Accessible COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution

The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies is conducting a survey to find where people with disabilities continue to face barriers in accessing the COVID-19 vaccine. The survey should take only about 10 minutes and will assist the Partnership in identifying strategies for equitable access to the COVID-19 vaccine for people with disabilities. If an alternative format is needed, please contact Priya Penner at [p.penner@disasterstrategies.org](mailto:p.penner@disasterstrategies.org). To access the survey, please click [here](#).