



# 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

October 15, 2021

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## **Want to Follow the Status of Priority Issues Between Updates?**

Visit the [PVAction Force](#) page to view our latest alerts and a list of key legislation and its status. Also, check out our [latest blog](#) on the status of some of PVA's veterans priorities for 2021 and [sign the petition](#) to improve access to air travel in honor of the 35th anniversary of the Air Carrier Access Act.

## **New Resources for Air Travel on PVA.org**

Check out [pva.org/airtravel](http://pva.org/airtravel) to see new resources for air travel passengers with disabilities, including new [complaint](#) and [travel tip](#) sheets and an animated video showing the barriers wheelchair users commonly encounter.

## **SURVEY ON ACCESS TO AIR TRAVEL**

October marks the 35th anniversary of the Air Carrier Access Act. This law prohibits disability-based discrimination in air travel. We need your help to learn more about the current air travel experiences of passengers with disabilities. Please complete a [short survey](#) to help inform our policy efforts on this issue. This survey is sponsored by Paralyzed Veterans of America and 11 other disability-focused organizations.

## **VETERANS BENEFITS/SOCIAL SECURITY COLA ANNOUNCED**

The Social Security Administration (SSA) announced on October 13 that Social Security benefits will receive a 5.9 percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) increase starting in 2022. SSA's COLA serves as a baseline for other federal benefit increases such as military and federal employee retirement pay and certain veterans' disability compensation programs which will also rise by that amount. This increase represents the largest COLA in nearly 40 years.

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## **PVA PARTICIPATES IN ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION WITH LEADING VSOs, SVAC CHAIRMAN**

In late September, PVA participated in a roundtable conversation with several of its veterans service organization (VSO) partners and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) Chairman Jon Tester (D-MT) to discuss ways Congress can best meet the evolving needs of veterans and their families. Much of the discussion centered on supporting veterans amid the ongoing pandemic, curbing veteran homelessness, providing benefits to veterans suffering from conditions related to hazardous exposures during military service, and delivering critically needed mental health services. Several participants, including PVA, urged the Chairman's support of bills that would automatically re-enroll eligible veterans in VA's clothing reimbursement program, allow adult children to remain under the Civilian Health and Medical Program for the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA) until age 26, and increase mammography accessibility for paralyzed and disabled veterans.

PVA's National Legislation Director Morgan Brown urged Chairman Tester to support S. 444, the "AUTO for Veterans Act," which would grant eligible veterans a second auto allowance giving them access to reliable, safe transportation and allowing them to take advantage of innovative automobile design and mobility equipment advancements. Mr. Brown also expressed PVA's concern with the extremely limited availability of home and community-based services through VA, including the urgent need to expand the Veteran Directed Care program to all of VA's medical centers. Morgan also identified some of the difficulties PVA members have in finding suitable workers to provide home health services and recommended that VA be properly resourced to administer its own programs to incentivize direct care workers for veterans.

### **UPDATE ON GOVERNMENT FUNDING AND VETERANS BILLS**

Congress was able to prevent a government shutdown recently and approved a temporary hike for the country's debt ceiling, but long-term solutions for both remain elusive. On September 30, lawmakers approved a temporary budget extension that runs through December 3, giving Congress about nine additional weeks to pass a formal budget plan for all federal agencies. A debt ceiling agreement, which passed 12 days later, raised the maximum amount the U.S. government can borrow by \$480 billion to what is now \$28.9 trillion. Financial experts say the increase could keep the country from defaulting on its debts for about three months but the exact timeframe depends on a number of factors including how fast the money is spent.

Congress has developed a habit of pushing its toughest priorities toward the end of the year, and 2021 is shaping up to be one of the most challenging yet. In addition to permanent solutions for the federal budget and the debt ceiling, lawmakers still need to reach agreement on and pass the infrastructure and reconciliation bills, the National Defense Authorization Act, and the perennial package extending a number of expiring authorities. We also hear there is still a possibility Congress may advance an omnibus bill that addresses some yet-to-be determined veterans-related issues. Some of those issues may be covered in a series of hearings conducted by the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees in late October and early November. PVA was invited to submit statements for some of these events, which we will cover in the next issue of the Washington Update.

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## AGENCIES TAKE STEPS TO PROMOTE VOTER PARTICIPATION

On March 7, the President signed an Executive Order to leverage the resources of the federal government to increase access to voter registration services and information about voting. The Executive Order called for each agency to submit to the Domestic Policy Advisor a strategic plan outlining the ways that the agency can promote nonpartisan voter registration and voter participation. These strategic plans are just the beginning of each agency's commitments. In the weeks and months to come, agencies will further build out their capacity to get relevant information out to the public, help eligible voters better understand their opportunities for engagement, and facilitate participation in the electoral process.

The Department of Defense (DOD) has announced that it will support a comprehensive approach to information and voting awareness for servicemembers and civilian personnel voting at home, in addition to the structure currently assisting members of the military stationed away from home and citizens overseas. DOD will develop materials in additional languages and send nonpartisan information at regular intervals before federal elections to ensure that eligible servicemembers and their families — particularly first-time voters — have opportunities to register and vote, if they wish.

The Department of Justice has created an online resource for the public that will provide links to state-specific information about registering and voting; detail its enforcement of federal voting rights laws and guidance it has issued to jurisdictions on the scope of those laws; and explain how to report potential violations.

VA will provide materials and assistance in registering and voting for tens of thousands of inpatients and residents, including VA Medical Center inpatients and residents of VA nursing homes and treatment centers for homeless veterans. VA will also facilitate assistance in registering and voting for homebound veterans and their caregivers through VA's home-based and telehealth teams.

### NEWS OF NOTE

- VA Bystander Intervention Training for Veterans

This free, [online training course](#) covers information and practical techniques that veterans can use if they observe harassment or sexual assault at a VA facility. It will enable veterans to feel confident in their ability to recognize a situation where harassment or sexual assault is taking place, know how to get help, and what to do or say to help prevent it from getting worse. VA is committed to maintaining a safe, respectful, and welcoming environment in every VA facility. Veterans can contribute toward that effort by learning to recognize and respond to harassment and sexual assault through this 30-minute video session.

- National Council on Disability Holds Quarterly Meeting

The National Council on Disability (NCD) held its quarterly meeting on October 7. The agenda covered a range of topics from a presentation by the Partnership for

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Inclusive Disaster Strategies on COVID-19, hurricanes, and other natural emergencies and their impact on people with disabilities living in congregate settings to updates on Council projects and reports. NCD currently has a study underway looking at the high death toll of people with disabilities during COVID and how community care could alleviate future problems. Its 2021 Progress Report focusing on COVID-19 will be released later this month and is to include recommendations on how to pandemic proof the US. Information about NCD and its work can be found [here](#).

- September Labor Force Participation Rate for People with Disabilities Shows Improvement

In the [Bureau of Labor Statistics \(BLS\) Jobs Report](#) released October 8, the labor force participation rate for working-age people with disabilities increased from 35.6 percent in August 2021 to 36.4 percent in September 2021 (up 2.2 percent or 0.8 percentage points). For working-age people without disabilities, the labor force participation rate decreased from 76.8 percent in August to 76.5 percent in September 2021 (down 0.4 percent or 0.3 percentage points). The labor force participation rate is the percentage of the population that is working, not working and on temporary layoff, or not working and actively looking for work. “People with disabilities appear to be recovering faster than people without disabilities. In fact, their labor market engagement is now surpassing their pre-Pandemic levels,” emphasized Andrew Houtenville, PhD, professor of economics and the research director of the University of New Hampshire’s Institute on Disability.

## WEBINARS, BRIEFINGS, AND HEARINGS

- Every October, the federal government, businesses, and organizations mark [National Disability Employment Awareness Month \(NDEAM\)](#). The theme this year is America’s Economic Recovery is Powered by Inclusion. PVA and many other organizations are hosting informative webinars and briefings on various aspects of workforce issues affecting people with disabilities.

- **Celebrate NDEAM with PVA - October 26 from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. ET**

Did you know that many veterans with disabilities are served by employment programs outside the VA? Many of these veterans seek employment opportunities through Social Security’s Ticket to Work program, state vocational rehabilitation agencies, and state workforce systems. This webinar will feature the staff of PVA’s Veterans Career Program who will share their insights and experiences serving these veterans along with stories of veterans like [Tracey Cooper Harris](#) and [Jorge Chirinos](#). **Register [here](#).**

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- Celebrate NDEAM 2021 and the 20th Anniversary of the ODEP – October 20 from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. ET

U.S. Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh will join Assistant Secretary of Labor for Disability Employment Policy, Taryn Williams, for a virtual celebration of NDEAM and the 20th anniversary of the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). This event will feature dialogues with the Director of the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, Jenny Yang, and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Disability Employment Policy, Jennifer Sheehy, along with a video showcase highlighting strategies in action for an equitable, disability-inclusive recovery. Register [here](#).

- CCD invites you to a briefing to celebrate NDEAM – October 28 from 1 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. ET

The Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities (CCD) will host two panel discussions on innovative strategies and best practices to recruit and hire people with disabilities in competitive integrated employment. The first panel will present how one state (Washington) successfully transitioned from sheltered workshops paying subminimum wages to competitive integrated employment. Learn how state, provider, and local leaders collaborated to create a legislative movement to phase out 14c. The second panel will tackle three critical themes: changing attitudinal barriers that impact workforce access, tracking technological developments driving opportunities for remote workers with disabilities, and the predictions about the labor force consequences of "Long COVID." Register [here](#).

- Federal Policy Priorities on Disability Employment: NDEAM 2021 and Beyond – November 10: 1 p.m. ET

Nineteen months into the COVID-19 pandemic and 10 months into the Biden Administration, this webinar will feature a host of high-level federal leaders reflecting on their work, their priorities, and their hopes for the months ahead and how to link greater inclusion, diversity, and equity to the economic recovery of America. Register [here](#).

- For the latest VA committee hearings, please visit the [House Veterans' Affairs Committee](#) and [Senate Veterans Affairs' Committee](#) pages.