



Washington Update

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INDEPENDENT BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS RELEASED

The Independent Budget veterans service organizations (IBVSOs) – DAV, PVA, and the VFW – recently released [VA budget recommendations for fiscal years \(FY\) 2023 and 2024](#). The recommendations serve as a roadmap to ensure VA is fully funded and capable of carrying out its mission to serve veterans and their families, both now and in the future.

The Independent Budget's (IB) recommendations, coupled with the Administration's FY 2023 budget proposal, will be used to guide Congress with its spending decisions for the coming year. For FY 2023, the IBVSOs recommend \$121.2 billion for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) to meet the full demand for care both within VA's health care facilities and its Community Care Networks. The IB report details specific funding levels and targeted increases for VHA programs, including a \$490 million increase for the Caregiver Support Program, \$395 million boost for homeless veterans' programs; \$288 million more for mental health services and suicide prevention efforts; \$160 million increase for health care for women veterans

and minorities; and \$1.8 billion to close the gap in clinical care and support vacancies across VHA. This year's IB recommendations also contain significant plus ups for VA's Home and Community-Based Services, including additional funding to expand the Veteran Directed Care Program into every VA Medical Center.

For the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), the IBVSOs recommend a total of \$3.9 billion for FY 2023—an increase of approximately \$510 million over the estimated FY 2022 appropriations level—and \$251 million for the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA). The IB recommendations include additional information technology (IT) funding for both VBA and BVA to modernize their IT infrastructure, reduce backlogs, and streamline the delivery of benefits.

The IBVSOs believe VA infrastructure projects, including those that present a safety risk to veterans and employees, must continue to be fully funded even as the Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) process plays out over the next several years. To accomplish this, the IB recommends Congress appropriate \$3.8 billion for VA's major and minor construction programs in FY 2023 to fund new and



existing major construction projects, begin advance planning and design development on VA's highest-priority health care construction projects, and boost support for pending minor construction projects.

PVA WELCOMES NEW ADVOCACY ATTORNEY

Danica Gonzalves, Esq. recently started as PVA's Advocacy Attorney focusing on disability civil rights. For five years, Danica directed The Veterans Consortium's Discharge Upgrade Program. The program provided legal assistance to thousands of veterans that received less than honorable discharges for conduct related to mental health conditions and military sexual trauma. She received a competitive Equal Justice Works fellowship to build the program and was a key player in obtaining a \$1,000,000 grant for continual funding. Danica is a graduate of The George Washington University Law School where she focused on disability rights and health care.

During law school, Danica interned at University Legal Services, now known as Disability Rights DC, and Mental Health America, where she protected and advocated for individuals with mental health conditions. She gained federal experience at the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the General Counsel, and the Department of Justice (DOJ), Disability Rights Section. At DOJ, Danica worked on physical accessibility, community integration, accommodations, and employment. Her unique background brings greater knowledge of disability civil rights and veterans law to PVA.

HOUSE APPROVES NEW STOP-GAP FUNDING BILL

In early February, the House approved another temporary funding bill—the third one this fiscal year to buy more time to set federal agency spending levels and avoid a government shutdown. The Senate is expected to consider the measure soon which would give lawmakers until March 11 to pass other legislation that funds the federal government through the remainder of the fiscal year.

HOUSE COMMITTEE EXAMINES DEPENDENT AND SURVIVOR BENEFITS

On February 8, the House Veterans' Affairs,

Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs conducted an oversight hearing entitled, "Honoring Our Promise: Reviewing the Effectiveness of Services for Dependents and Survivors." The Subcommittee examined ways to increase VA's outreach and education efforts, the quality of services provided, and areas for improvement in the delivery of care and benefits to survivors and dependents. They also looked at the experience of survivors and dependents, challenges to unique populations such as caregivers and members of the LGBTQIA+ population, and COVID's continued impact on service delivery, as well as discussing ways to improve and increase collaboration between VA and other federal agencies.

PVA submitted a statement for the record focused on survivors' general lack of awareness of the benefits they are entitled to, and the need for VA to improve its outreach to them. We also addressed the urgent need for better financial protections for surviving spouses, including the need to increase Dependency and Indemnity Compensation, and reiterated our calls for Congress to pass H.R. 5607, the Justice for ALS Veterans Act. The hearing is available [here](#). The written statement is available [here](#).

STOP THE WAIT ACT INTRODUCED

On February 3, Representative Lloyd Doggett (D-TX), Chair of the House Ways and Means Health Subcommittee, Senator Bob Casey (D-PA), Chair of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, and Representative Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA) introduced the Stop the Wait Act (H.R. 6583/S. 3575) to end the waiting periods during which Americans with serious disabilities are denied access to Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Medicare. Under current law, those who qualify for SSDI must wait five months before their disability benefits begin and two years before they can access Medicare.

These waiting periods have imposed considerable hardship on many SSDI beneficiaries who may have exhausted all their savings while going through the application process for benefits and may no longer be covered by an employer health

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insurance plan. Representative Doggett featured his bill in a hearing before his Subcommittee on the day that the Stop the Wait Act was introduced. The hearing can be viewed [here](#).

CAREGIVER COUNCILS MEET FOR UPDATES ON NATIONAL CAREGIVER STRATEGY

The RAISE Family Caregiver Advisory Council and Advisory Council to Support Grandparents Raising Grandchildren [met jointly on January 25](#) for updates on the development and implementation of the national family caregiving strategy called for by the [Recognize, Assist, Include, Support, and Engage \(RAISE\) Family Caregivers Act](#) that was signed into law in 2018.

The main aim of the meeting was to inform the members of the two councils about the progress made to date in data collection, cross agency coordination, and planning for a final set of recommendations to launch the national family caregiver strategy later this year. Preliminary themes and recommendations were part of an [initial report](#) to Congress submitted in September 2021.

Under the direction of the Administration for Community Living (ACL), several stakeholder and federal agency partner meetings were convened in 2021 to receive input about the needs of family caregivers and identify the array of federal programs designed to support them. Eighteen federal agencies were asked to submit action items to ACL on ways their programs can fulfill the goals of the national caregiver strategy. Seven agencies have reportedly completed their action plans, including VA, which submitted 25 proposals across the five caregiving strategy goals identified in the September report. These action plans from the federal agencies will be reviewed by ACL and the Councils before the final release of the strategy in August.

INCLUSIVE DESIGN OF AUTONOMOUS VEHICLES

Self-driving or “autonomous” vehicles stand to revolutionize road transportation in the U.S. and around the world. Their cutting-edge technologies and engineering innovations have the potential to significantly expand transit options for many people,

including those with disabilities. It is important that autonomous vehicles (AVs) are designed to be inclusive of everyone.

In the spring of 2021, the U.S. Access Board hosted a four-part series of virtual meetings on making AVs accessible to passengers with disabilities. The Board provided an open forum where members of the public and stakeholders could discuss considerations, challenges, and solutions in designing accessible AVs. The sessions covered accessibility for passengers with mobility, sensory, or cognitive disabilities. A summary report on the forum is now [available online](#).

HVAC HOLDS MARKUP ON THE RAISE AND STRONG ACTS

On February 2, the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee (HVAC) held a [markup](#) on two bills: H.R. 5575, the VA Nurse and Physician Assistant RAISE Act, and H.R. 6411, the STRONG Veterans Act of 2022. The RAISE Act would increase the rate of pay for certain VA nurses and other medical positions. The STRONG Veterans Act would make certain improvements in mental health care provided by VA. During the markup, the [committee approved](#) an amended version of the RAISE Act and the STRONG Act. PVA has expressed support for the RAISE Act to address staffing needs within VA in furtherance of our priority to protect access to VA’s specialized health care services.

SVAC PASSES THE HEALTH CARE FOR BURN PIT VETERANS ACT

On February 2, the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee (SVAC) [unanimously passed](#) the Health Care for Burn Pit Veterans Act. The bill was [unveiled](#) the previous day by SVAC Chairman Jon Tester (D-MT) and Ranking Member Jerry Moran (R-KS). This legislation would offer Post-9/11 combat veterans - including those who suffer from conditions caused by toxic exposures such as burn pits - access to VA health care. More information about the bill is available [here](#).



NEWS OF NOTE

NCD Holds Quarterly Meeting

The National Council on Disability (NCD) held its quarterly meeting on January 27 to receive updates on several of its ongoing projects and hear presentations on state level initiatives to promote health equity and on a new film highlighting disability culture and inclusive storytelling. As part of its work on a health equity framework, the Council voted to urge the Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services to adopt standards for accessible medical equipment promulgated by the Access Board.

NCD is also looking into the impact of COVID-19 on residents of congregate settings and devoted public comment exclusively to receiving information for this effort. The project will examine the state of the nation's home and community-based services prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic that contributed to the inability of residents with disabilities to transition to lesser-density community housing options and resulted in widespread deaths.

Further information about the Council and its meeting can be found [here](#).

People with Disabilities Continue Strong Employment Trends

According to the Kessler Foundation/University of New Hampshire Institute on Disability [monthly update on national trends in disability employment](#), January job numbers again showed gains for people with disabilities. The numbers continued to surpass their pre-pandemic levels of employment for the fifth straight month. The labor force participation rate for working-age people with disabilities increased from 36.7 percent in December 2020 to 37.5 percent in January 2022.

VA Pensions for Surviving Spouses

Did you know VA provides tax-free, supplemental income for qualified, surviving spouses? Learn more by watching this [VA SITREP video](#) and visiting the web links in the video description. As

always, you can also contact a PVA service officer for more information and assistance.

EVENTS, HEARINGS, & WEBINARS

We Need Your Stories

PVA is advocating for a critical piece of legislation that will have significant impact on women veterans with SCI/D. H.R. 4794/S. 2533, the Making Advances in Mammography and Medical Options for Veterans Act or MAMMO Act, will increase access to mammography services for all veterans. But, for women with SCI/D, this bill will ensure accessible mammography services. Receiving informed, gender-specific care at VA can be a challenge for women veterans with catastrophic disabilities. If you have experienced a difficult appointment while attempting to receive mammography services either in VA or in the community, please contact Julie Howell, Associate Legislative Director, at JulieH@pva.org.

Airborne Hazard Class

VA is holding a free virtual class entitled, "Airborne Hazards and Burn Pits: What You Need to Know," on February 24 from 1:30-3:00 p.m. ET. To learn more about the class and to register, click [here](#). All veterans will need to register in order to participate. If you have trouble with registration, email VA's War Related Illness and Injury Study Center [here](#).

Caregiver Support Line Monthly Calls

The VA Caregiver Support Line's (CSL) monthly education call helps caregivers think about themselves and what they need. Join CSL this February for "Focusing on the Forgotten...Me!" on one of the following dates and times:

- February 9 at 7:00 p.m. ET
- February 16 at 3:00 p.m. ET

Caregivers must register to join the CSL monthly education call. To register, call [1-855-260-3274](tel:1-855-260-3274). Caregivers who are unable to attend the calls can access presentations on the CSL's [webpage](#).

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Webinar: ADA Advocacy in the Post-ADA World

The Mid-Atlantic ADA Center is hosting a webinar on February 22 from 2:00-3:30 p.m. ET entitled, "ADA Advocacy in the Post-ADA World." This webinar will chronicle the on-going advocacy efforts of the Roads to Freedom Center for Independent Living and North Central Pennsylvania ADAPT as they worked with the city of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, to provide access for people with disabilities to the city's government buildings, programs, and services (ADA Title II.) There is no charge to access this session. Real-time captions will be available, and the session will be recorded for later viewing. For more information and to register, click [here](#).

PVA's Medicare Home Health Care Webinar Now Available

PVA hosted a webinar on January 26 about Medicare Home Health Care in partnership with the Center for Medicare Advocacy. This webinar, along with additional resource materials, are now available [here](#).

Upcoming Hearings

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

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