



# Washington Update

Check out the [PVAAction Force](#) page to view our latest alerts and a list of key legislation and its status.

## **2023 COLA ANNOUNCED FOR VETERANS AND SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS**

The Social Security Administration (SSA) announced on October 13 that Social Security benefits will receive an 8.7 percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) increase starting in 2023. The increase is reflective of the effects of inflation. On October 10, the President signed legislation ensuring that certain veterans' disability compensation programs will receive the same COLA. Military and federal employment retirement benefits will also be increased.

## **RATES FOR VA HOUSING ADAPTATION GRANT PROGRAMS RAISED**

The value for some of VA's housing adaptation grant programs were raised at the start of the new fiscal year which began on October 1, 2022. The maximum rate for the Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) grant is now \$109,986 and the Special Housing Adaptation (SHA) grant is now \$22,036. Additionally, rates for the Temporary Residence Adaptation (TRA) grant were raised to \$44,299 for the temporary version of the SAH grant and \$7,910 for the temporary SHA grant. The TRA grant assists veterans who qualify for an SAH or SHA grant but are living temporarily in a family member's home that needs modifications to improve accessibility.

## **UPDATING VA'S HOME MODIFICATION GRANT PROGRAMS**

The rates for VA's Home Improvements and Structural Alterations (HISA) grants do not increase to reflect the increased costs of construction. Currently, veterans who need a housing modification due to a service-connected disability may receive up to \$6,800. Veterans who rate 50 percent service-connected may receive the same amount even if a modification is needed due to a non-service-connected disability. Veterans who are not service-connected but are enrolled in the VA health care system can receive up to \$2,000. These are the maximum amounts an eligible veteran can receive in their lifetime.

In the past 12 years, most of VA's home modification grant programs received annual increases that cumulatively raised their value by 50 percent. So, if Congress had indexed the HISA grant program to the same inflation index the other programs use, or, if lawmakers regularly approved increases to keep up with inflation, HISA grant rates would be one and a half times higher than they are now.

Congress can restore much of the HISA grant program's purchasing power by passing the Autonomy for Disabled Veterans Act ([H.R. 5819/S. 4721](#)). This legislation establishes new base amounts of \$10,000 for veterans with a service-connected disability and \$5,000 for veterans with a non-service-connected disability. It also requires VA to apply an inflation formula to keep them



relevant in future years. Urge your Senators and Representative to take action now by clicking [here](#).

### **VA EXTENDS DELAY OF NEW EHR DEPLOYMENTS**

On October 13, the VA announced it would be delaying upcoming deployments of the Oracle Cerner electronic health record (EHR) until June 2023 to address challenges with the system and make sure it is functioning optimally for veterans and for VA health care personnel. This decision comes after Secretary Denis McDonough announced in July that the VA would delay EHR deployments until January 2023 to ensure that the system's issues had been resolved. Recently, the VA identified several issues needing additional attention at sites where the new EHR system has already been deployed.

Over the next few months, the VA will work closely with Oracle Cerner to resolve issues with the system's performance, maximize usability for VA health care providers, and ensure veterans are served by an effective EHR. In addition to the system review, the VA will be sending letters to every veteran who may have been impacted by these system challenges in some manner, asking that if they have experienced a delay in medications, appointments, referrals, or test results, to contact the VA through the call center or online. Once they reach out, these veterans can expect a member of their care team to follow up with them within five business days to resolve the issue. Click [here](#) to read VA's announcement in its entirety.

### **VA BOWEL AND BLADDER PROGRAM UPDATES**

Over the past year, the VA has been making changes to the Bowel and Bladder program. The Office of Community Care, in collaboration with the SCI/D National Program Office, has developed a standard form and two letters related to payments, which are currently pending Office of Management and Budget review and approval. In addition, the two offices are updating processes and communication related to payments. Last year, VA centralized the payment process. These additional changes will further standardize the claims process. PVA is also working to make additional improvements to the program's administration. Any

questions may be directed to Roscoe Butler, Senior Health Policy Advisor, at 202-461-7641 or [RoscoeB@PVA.org](mailto:RoscoeB@PVA.org).

### **PVA FILES COMPLAINT ON INACCESSIBLE GLOBAL ENTRY KIOSKS**

After a member's complaint about Global Entry kiosks at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport (FLL), PVA filed a complaint with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL). Upon arrival at FLL, the member found that the Global Entry kiosks were inaccessible. The kiosk requires facial recognition to take the picture necessary to present to the U.S Customs Agent. However, the cameras at the top of kiosks were too high to capture the member's photo while seated in a wheelchair.

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act requires electronic and information technology used by federal agencies be accessible for individuals with disabilities. PVA's formal complaint filed with CRCL alleged that FLL's Global Entry kiosks violate Section 508. CRCL recently acknowledged the complaint and sent it to the DHS Office of Inspector General for review.

### **FEDERAL STUDENT LOAN FORGIVENESS APPLICATION IS LIVE**

The Department of Education recently launched the Federal Student Loan Forgiveness application. This one-time debt relief is offered to any student that has a federal student loan. Collective student loan debt in the United States is an estimated \$1.75 trillion and the government is offering financial relief to eligible borrowers.

Eligibility criteria depends on your tax status in the years of 2020 and 2021. Borrowers who earned less than \$125,000 in 2020 and 2021, and who did not receive Pell Grants, may be eligible for up to \$10,000 in forgiveness. For families, the threshold for earnings is \$250,000 during those same years.

Borrowers who were the recipients of Pell Grants with those income thresholds, may be eligible for up to \$20,000 of forgiveness.

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The application is quick to complete and can be found [here](#). The deadline to apply is December 1, 2023. If borrowers are unsure about the status of their loans, they can go to [Studentaid.gov](http://Studentaid.gov) to review their loans and their status. The Department of Education will determine eligibility and will contact applicants if additional information is needed. Borrowers will be notified by their loan provider when their application has been processed.

### **PHILADELPHIA AGREES TO IMPROVE SIDEWALKS AND CURB RAMPS**

Recently, Philadelphia agreed to a fifteen-year [settlement](#) to construct and fix curb ramps in the city. The settlement agreement, which is awaiting court approval, resulted from a lawsuit filed in 2019, [Liberty Resources, Inc., et al. v. City of Philadelphia](#). The four plaintiffs in the case use mobility devices due to their disabilities. The plaintiffs alleged that the city's curb ramps and other walkways had physical barriers that impacted their ability to freely travel around the city; curb ramps were broken, steep, crumbling, and had inadequate detectable warnings; and the barriers made traveling independently difficult or impossible. The plaintiffs had experienced injuries from falling out of their wheelchairs or tripping over the obstacles. The plaintiffs sued the city alleging violations of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Over the next fifteen years, the city must take steps to repair existing curb ramps, install new accessible curb ramps, and maintain accessible curb ramps. Under the agreement, whenever the city constructs a new road or street with a pedestrian walkway, it must install accessible curb ramps, when feasible. The city agreed to install or repair at least 10,000 curb ramps within fifteen years, with a timeline of at least 2,000 every three years. By the end of the third year, and moving forward, the city must allow residents to submit requests for installation, repair, or maintenance using the city's website, phone app, by telephone, or in-person. The city must also make the number and location of the curb ramps publicly available.

### **WEBSITES AND SOFTWARE APPLICATIONS ACCESSIBILITY BILL INTRODUCED**

Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) and Representative John Sarbanes (D-MD) recently introduced legislation to decrease accessibility barriers in websites and software applications. The [Websites and Software Applications Accessibility Act \(S. 4998/H.R. 9021\)](#) would require the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to establish clear and enforceable accessibility guidelines for websites and software applications. The legislation seeks to address and remedy the systematic problems that exclude individuals with disabilities from equal participation in and equal access to all aspects of society. In March 2022, DOJ issued [guidance](#) on website accessibility under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). However, clear standards have not yet been promulgated. The legislation recognizes that without equal access to websites and applications, many individuals with disabilities are treated as second-class citizens. Due to differing opinions by the courts, the bill seeks to reaffirm that the ADA requires websites and software applications be readily accessible and useable by individuals with disabilities.

### **NEWS OF NOTE**

#### **CSP Broadens Services to Caregivers**

VA's Caregiver Support Program (CSP) is enhancing services offered to caregivers of veterans. One of them, [Caregiver Health and Wellbeing Coaching](#), empowers caregivers by helping them focus on their own health and wellbeing. It pairs caregivers with trained coaches (staff members from local CSP teams) who offer guidance in developing personalized health plans based on the caregiver's values and needs. Also, it connects caregivers with the resources that will help them achieve their goals. Coaching services are not offered at all locations so caregivers will need to contact their local CSP to check availability. Click [here](#) to view the full announcement.



## ACL Releases Older Americans Act Program Highlights

The Administration for Community Living (ACL) released its first comprehensive report on the accomplishments of Older Americans Act (OAA) Title III, VI, and VII programs. Enacted in 1965, the OAA supports an extensive system of services and supports for older adults, targeting those with the greatest economic or social need, particularly low-income and minority persons, older individuals with limited English proficiency, and older persons living in rural areas. The report provides an overview of the history of the OAA; the purpose and services of the Title III, VI, and VII programs; and summarizes accomplishments and results for each of the programs using 2020 data. The full report is available [here](#).

## National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers Now Available for Comments

The [National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers](#) released on September 21 is now open for a 60-day public comment period. Comments are due by the end of November. To submit comments, interested parties are asked to use the online form on the Administration for Community Living's [website](#): Instructions for commenting are included at the link. Comments may be directed to the strategy globally or on any of its four components.

## Fraud Alert for PACT Act Scams

The VA wants veterans to know that there has been an increase in PACT Act-related phishing (email), vishing (phone), and social media scams targeting veterans to access their PACT Act benefits or submit claims on their behalf. Veterans should always be cautious of anyone who guarantees a lucrative financial benefit or service and remember that PVA service officers will assist you with your claim for free. Click [here](#) for tips to avoid PACT Act scams.

## Justice Department Resolves Disability Discrimination Lawsuit Against Housing Authority of New Orleans Properties

On October 3, the Department of Justice [announced](#) that the Housing Authority of New Orleans and seven private developers have agreed to pay \$250,000 to settle claims that they violated the Fair Housing Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act by failing to design and construct eight multifamily residential properties and associated places of public accommodation in accordance with those laws. As part of the settlement, the defendants also agreed to make extensive retrofits to remove accessibility barriers at the properties. The properties at issue are Bienville Basin, Columbia Parc, Faubourg Lafitte, Fischer Senior Village, Guste III, Harmony Oaks, Marrero Commons, and River Garden.

## Assistance Available for Veterans After a Natural Disaster

The VA recently published resources available for veterans, dependents, survivors, and caregivers who have experienced a natural disaster. A [SitRep YouTube video](#) outlines what assistance is available and where to go for help.

Also, the VA is offering a suspension of debt repayments for veterans and family members affected by Hurricane Fiona or Hurricane Ian. For suspension of benefit debt, veterans and beneficiaries can contact the VA Debt Management Center via [Ask VA](#) (select Veterans Affairs-Debt as the category) or call 800-827-0648. For suspension of medical care and pharmacy copayment debt, veterans and beneficiaries can call 866-400-1238. Veterans can also check the status of their VA debt online on [VA's debt portal](#).

## HUD Awards Funds to Modify and Repair Low-Income Veterans' Homes

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) recently announced that \$5 million is now available to modify and repair low-income veterans' homes. The funding is expected to support 330 low-income disabled veterans. Details can be found [here](#).

## Disability Statistics Compendium Released

The annual state of science conference on disability statistics took place on October 6 and 7 and focused on the release of the 2021 Disability Statistics Compendium. The conference is hosted by the University of New Hampshire, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Statistics and Demographics. A chapter of the report devoted to veterans provides data on veterans with a service-connected disability rating; the prevalence of disabilities in the veteran population; the portion of the veteran population that experiences poverty [as well as the difference between the poverty rates of veterans with and without disabilities (poverty gap)], by disability status. The compendium can be accessed [here](#). Presentations from the conference are available [here](#).

## Reeve Foundation Summit

The Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation held its third annual summit in Washington, DC on October 13 and 14. Bringing together advocates, family members, researchers, and other stakeholders, the conference featured presentations on the challenges faced by caregivers, updates from the Administration for Community Living, planning for pregnancy with SCI, and the latest in research on SCI/D. PVA Associate Executive Director for Government Relations Heather Ansley appeared on a panel discussing air travel issues and the legislative and policy environment for addressing them. Information about the Summit and the Reeve Foundation can be found [here](#).

## HEARINGS & SURVEYS

### VA Requests Feedback on Motto

As the number of women veterans increases, the VA is seeking ways to make its facilities more inviting to them. Many women report feeling unwelcome at VA medical centers which often serves as a barrier to them receiving care.

Some women veterans feel that updating the VA motto would help them feel more welcome. The current VA

motto, “To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan,” Is an excerpt from President Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address in March of 1865.

In recent years, the VA and veterans have debated if there is a way to make the motto more inclusive for women veterans. To understand the perspective of veterans across the country, the VA is conducting a survey to assess what veterans think might be the best way to adapt the motto to include the service and sacrifice of women, who are currently the fastest-growing demographic in the veteran population.

You can participate in the survey [here](#). The deadline to participate is October 29.

### Upcoming Veterans’ Affairs Committee Action

Please visit the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee [webpage](#) and the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee [webpage](#) for information on upcoming hearings and markups.