



# Washington Update

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## **PVA NATIONAL PRESIDENT AND CEO TESTIFY AT HVAC HEARING ON CARE AND BENEFITS FOR SCI/D VETERANS—CAPPING OFF PVA’S 2024 ADVOCACY LEGISLATION SEMINAR**

On June 13, PVA [National President Robert Thomas](#) and [CEO Carl Blake](#) testified before the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee (HVAC) in a hearing titled, “[A Call to Action: Meeting the Needs of the Spinal Cord Injury and Disorders \(SCI/D\) Veteran Community](#).” The first panel witnesses were Dr. Erica Scavella, Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Services, Veterans Health Administration (VHA), who was accompanied by Jeffrey London, Executive Director, Medical Disability Examination Office, Veterans Benefits Administration, and Steve Bracci, Director, Claims and Medical Exams Benefits Inspection Division, VA Office of Inspector General.

Dr. Scavella provided a high-level overview of the services available through VA’s SCI/D system of care. During his time for questions of the witnesses, HVAC Chairman Mike Bost (R-IL) told Dr. Scavella that he was concerned about staffing at SCI/D centers. Dr. Scavella responded that VA expects them to be fully staffed and then noted that there is a nine percent vacancy rate across the VA health care system.

President Thomas and CEO Blake were witnesses on the second panel, along with Sonya Sotak, Chief Government Affairs Officer, I AM ALS, and Dr. Jenny Kiratli, VA Research Health Scientist and Director of the SCI Clinical Research Program, who testified on behalf of the American Federation of Government Employees. In his [testimony](#), President Thomas focused on the importance of care provided to veterans through the VA’s SCI/D system of care. He summed up this need by stating, “That’s why we become very concerned when SCI/D centers have to close beds because they don’t have enough nurses to properly staff them.” He then called on VA to properly deploy its resources and request the funding the department needs to provide the level of care outlined in VHA Directive 1176. He said that, “If the VA system of care isn’t properly funded to ensure that staffing levels meet the needs of veterans with SCI/D, then our government is defaulting on the promise made to care for us should we become catastrophically injured or ill in our service to this great nation.”

President Thomas also called on Congress to pass the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act (H.R. 8371). He noted that veterans who are at the 65 percent cap on care VA can pay for in the home can’t wait anymore for Congress to pass legislation removing the cap. Veterans who hit the cap, such as those with ALS, can be



forced to go into a care facility, sometimes far from their homes.

CEO Blake's [statement](#) took exception to VA's claims that staff vacancies are low as he outlined staffing deficiencies in the SCI/D system of care and their impact on paralyzed veterans. He noted the SCI/D system of care is "at a breaking point." He further stated that, "Some real effort needs to be put into rejuvenating this system or it's going to collapse on itself." In his written statement, he discussed the negative consequences of outdated COVID-related restrictions, as well as the lack of facility-based long-term care.

The hearing was the capstone of PVA's 2024 Advocacy Legislation Seminar in Washington, DC. Over 100 PVA members and chapter leaders and staff participated in the event and visited the offices of nearly 300 members of Congress. [PVA's priorities](#) included [preserving the SCI/D system of care](#) and passage of legislation supporting long-term services and supports, housing modifications, survivor benefits, and dignified access to air travel-related security screenings. PVA also released a [new video](#) featuring President Thomas and his wife focused on the importance of the VA's SCI/D system of care.

### **SVAC AND SENATE AGING COMMITTEE HOLD JOINT HEARING—HEROES AT HOME: IMPROVING SERVICES FOR VETERANS AND THEIR CAREGIVERS**

On June 5, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) and the Special Committee on Aging held a joint hearing on improving services for veterans and their caregivers. The main purpose of the hearing was to examine the vital care provided to veterans and caregivers through the VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) and to draw attention to the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act (H.R. 8371), which has yet to see floor action in either the House or the Senate.

A number of witnesses were invited to testify about their experiences with the PCAFC, including Peter Townsend, an Army veteran and PVA member. Mr.

Townsend informed the committees that he has multiple sclerosis (MS) and often relies on a wheelchair to get around. He and his wife, who is his caregiver, applied for benefits through the PCAFC and they were surprised to learn their application was denied. It was denied because, according to the VA, he did not require assistance with certain activities of daily living each and every time. According to Mr. Townsend, with conditions like MS, the symptoms tend to wax and wane. They're not always the same every single day. He testified that, "Many veterans like myself are excluded from what would otherwise be a very valuable program."

The committees also heard from Hannah Nieskens, whose husband, Kelly, another Army veteran, sustained serious injuries after his Humvee was struck by a large IED. Upon regaining consciousness and exiting the vehicle, Kelly was struck by a large-caliber rifle round that traveled through his ribs, hit his armored plates, and ricocheted multiple times through his torso before lodging near his spine.

In 2011, Mr. and Mrs. Nieskens also applied for benefits through the PCAFC, and were accepted into the program. In 2021, ten years after entering VA's PCAFC, they were notified that Kelly needed a reassessment to determine if he was eligible to remain in the PCAFC program based on the new regulations VA issued in October 2020. On March 23, 2022, they received notification informing them that he no longer met the eligibility criteria and were issued a letter dismissing him from the program.

To access the hearing, click [here](#).

### **HOUSE PASSES FY 2025 MILCON/VA BILL**

At the beginning of June, the House approved its version of the fiscal year (FY) 2025 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies (MILCON/VA) appropriations bill by a vote of 209-197. Prior to the final vote on the \$378.6 billion bill, lawmakers successfully attached several VA-related provisions, including one that adds an additional \$5 million to the Veterans Health Administration's Office of Mental Health. The intent behind the added monies is to help

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veterans with disabilities and mental health and substance use challenges. Another pair of provisions added more than \$8 million for additional Community-Based Outpatient Clinics and mobile medical units which enable the VA to provide care for veterans closer to where they live. Other language in the bill emphasizes the need to modernize the Highly Rural Transportation Grant Program, including updating the definition of highly rural, and prevents the VA from decommissioning its mileage and travel reimbursement kiosks at its medical facilities. You can view the bill, which also adds \$2 million to medical and prosthetic research, [here](#).

### **HVAC OVERSIGHT HEARING IN RESPONSE TO BONUSES FOR VA LEADERS**

On June 4, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) held a full committee oversight hearing dedicated to an Office of Inspector General (OIG) report published in early May. [The OIG report](#) detailed how VA leadership improperly awarded more than \$10 million in incentives to central office senior executives. Critical skill incentives (CSI), available due to the passage of the PACT Act, were intended to be issued as a recruitment and retention tool for employees who possess a "high demand skill or skill that is at a shortage." The OIG found that inadequate justifications were given for Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) central office executives who were granted CSI awards and that the awards were inconsistent with the intent of the PACT Act and against VA policy.

The first witness before HVAC was the Honorable Michael Missal, Inspector General for the VA. Mr. Missal explained the findings of the report, highlighting that the granting of these awards to central office executives violated VA internal policy and that the awards should never have been granted. Mr. Missal also shared that when VA Secretary Denis McDonough learned of the CSIs being issued he immediately called for them to be withdrawn. He also called the OIG to request an investigation.

Secretary McDonough was the second witness to testify before the committee and he took full responsibility for

his senior VHA and VBA staff. The testimony got heated on several occasions with one congressman asking the VA Secretary to resign over the issuing of the CSIs to central office executives without clear justification. The Secretary again stressed that as soon as he learned of the issuance of these CSIs that he demanded they all be called back.

The Secretary and the OIG report highlight that more than 92 percent of the awards have been recalled and the remaining balances are being returned via a payment plan. A senior human resources official within VA was the final say in the awarding of these CSIs. She is no longer employed with the Department.

You can watch the hearing [here](#).

### **NEWS OF NOTE**

#### **DAMA Subcommittee Holds Oversight Hearing**

On June 12, the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) subcommittee held an oversight hearing focused on Total Disability Rating based on Individual Unemployability (TDIU). TDIU is a benefit awarded to veterans who do not hold a 100 percent total and permanent disability rating but whose other disability ratings impede their ability to maintain employment.

Several veterans service organizations testified in support of the benefit stressing to the committee that the needs of veterans should be Congress's priority. PVA submitted a [statement for the record](#) in support of the program.

You can watch the hearing [here](#).

#### **Inaccurate Caregiver Stipend Payments**

On June 11, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) notified PVA and other veterans service organizations that in certain parts of the country, updates to the stipend rate for the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers, which took effect in January 2020, were not properly calculated. VHA estimates that up to 7,300 caregivers could be affected



and they are working to determine the exact number now. Once that action is completed, VHA will ensure timely notification is provided to affected individuals and they will take the necessary steps to correct their stipend payments.

## UPCOMING HEARINGS

### Upcoming Veterans' Committee Activities

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

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