



# Washington Update

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

## IMPORTANT VA FUNDING UPDATES FOR VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Earlier this year, the VA informed Congress that the department needed an additional \$2.9 billion in funding to pay veterans' pension and disability benefits for fiscal year (FY) 2024, which ends on September 30. VA also requested an extra \$12 billion in order to provide medical care for veterans and support their caregivers in FY 2025.

In light of significant advocacy from the veterans community, including from our own PVAAction Force advocates, Congress approved, and the President has signed, H.R. 9468, the Veterans Benefits Continuity and Accountability Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2024. This legislation provides the additional funding needed for VA to pay critical benefits for an estimated seven million veterans, their families, and survivors on October 1.

Before leaving town last week, Congress also approved a continuing resolution (CR) which, with just a couple of exceptions, maintains the government's current spending levels through December 20. Despite the Administration's request, the CR offers no additional cash for the Veterans Health Administration. Lawmakers wanted more time to determine the cause of the deficit, as well as where the needed funds would come from due to caps on federal spending. However, it does allow

the department to spend the \$142 billion it received through advanced appropriations faster, to ensure it can meet veteran's healthcare needs.

## SVAC HOLDS HEARING ON VA BUDGET SHORTFALL

On September 18, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) [held a hearing](#) addressing current and future VA budget challenges. This hearing followed a similar hearing in the House Veterans' Affairs Committee earlier in the month. As in the House hearing, the Under Secretary for Health (USH) Dr. Shereef Elnahal and Under Secretary for Benefits (USB) Josh Jacobs testified on behalf of the VA.

Senators on the committee pushed for answers as to why the VA is experiencing such a drastic budget shortfall, especially in light of significant pressure from Senate appropriators encouraging the VA to request more funding. The department defended their initial budget requests claiming they were accurate but that rising enrollment and benefits authorized by the PACT Act were the culprit for increased costs. Both the USB and USH stood by VA's decision to eliminate the additional eligibility cohorts, which were spaced out in two-year windows over the next 10 years and authorized in the PACT Act, instead allowing those eligible veterans to enroll in VA this year.



Another topic discussed by multiple senators were the improper authorizations of critical skills incentive (CSI) payments, which the Office of Inspector General [published a report](#) on in May of this year. Senators from both sides of the aisle fired off aggressive questions for VA leadership about the CSI payments, the budget shortfall, and budget mismanagement by the VA.

### **PVA LEGISLATIVE PRIORITY CLEARS THE HOUSE**

On September 17, several pieces of veteran-focused legislation were passed out of the House. A few of the bills are of direct interest to PVA members. One of the bills, H.R. 777, the Veterans' Compensation Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) Act of 2024, would increase compensation rates for veterans with service-connected disabilities, the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for survivors, and other related benefits. The COLA would match any increase in Social Security benefits.

Another bill, H.R. 6324, the Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, Veterans Affairs Major Medical Facility Authorization Act, would authorize the VA to carry out major medical facility projects during FY 2024 and the maximum amounts that can be spent on each project. \$3.3 billion was already appropriated to fund major construction across VA, including \$3.12 million for the new SCI/D building in San Diego and other facility improvements such as seismic corrections. However, the funding has to be authorized before it can be expended.

Finally, H.R. 7342, the Veterans Accessibility Advisory Committee Act of 2024, was also voted out of the House. This bill would create a Federal Advisory Committee dedicated to accessibility across the VA system and would ensure that several veterans service organizations have a seat at the table when analyzing the disparities and barriers faced by disabled veterans. This bill was a top priority during PVA's Advocacy Legislation Seminar in June. The bill is now in the Senate and we encourage folks to reach out to their senators and urge them to [support it](#) on PVAction Force.

### **SENATE OPTS FOR INFORMAL CONFERENCE WITH THE HOUSE TO FINALIZE THE NDAA**

With limited options and time running out, the Senate opted not to vote on the Senate Armed Services Committee's version of the fiscal year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) this year. Instead, they took their bill and a small package of amendments that the chamber could agree on and went straight to an informal conference with the House. The move allows the two chambers to meet informally and work out most of the details of a compromise bill prior to the election. If they are successful, only a handful of tougher issues would have to be formally negotiated when everyone returns in mid-November.

Unfortunately, few veterans-related issues were accepted into the amendment package. The ones that were included would direct VA to create a toll-free helpline to provide information on VA benefits and services to veterans and their families; only allow licensed health care professionals to perform medical disability exams; and make spouses eligible for the disabled veterans' outreach program. A fourth provision directs the VA to report to Congress on the status and timeline of the VA Airborne Hazards & Open Burn Pit Registry 2.0.

PVA had hoped the chamber would consider adding amendments that would allow combat injured veterans to receive their full military retirement pay and VA disability compensation without offset (Richard Star Act), and future surviving spouses of veterans who pass from ALS to receive the "Dependency and Indemnity Compensation Kicker" (Justice for ALS Veterans Act). A third, and arguably more important provision that was extracted from the Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act would raise the cap on how much the VA can pay for the cost of home care from 65 percent of the cost of nursing home care to 100 percent. While the NDAA is not the normal vehicle to advance provisions like these, we greatly appreciate Senators Crapo, Coons, and Moran's efforts (respectively) to try and insert them in the bill.

Fortunately, the individual measures for each of these issues remain active until the end of this Congress, so we will continue our efforts to get them passed as stand-

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alone measures or as part of another piece of advancing legislation.

### **DAMA SUBCOMMITTEE HOLDS OVERSIGHT HEARING ON CONTRACTED MEDICAL EXAMINATIONS**

On September 18, the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) Subcommittee for the House Veterans' Affairs Committee held an oversight hearing evaluating the contracted examiners used by the VA to conduct the Compensation and Pension (C&P) examinations for the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). Representatives from VA, the Government Accountability Office, and the VFW were present and provided in-person testimony. PVA provided a statement for the record which you can read [here](#).

Over 90 percent of disability compensation exams are now performed by contracted exam vendors. It is VA's job to implement contract requirements and processes to ensure that contractors are appropriately scheduling veterans for exams, and that veterans are not being forced to attend the same exam more than once. Some of the issues that were repeatedly addressed were distances traveled by veterans to their examinations, lack of expertise by the examiners, timeliness of exams, and unclear procedures from the VBA. The Medical Disability Examination Office has been proactive as-of-late in modifying contracts and implementing new processes meant to improve the C&P experience. However, much is still left for improvement. You can watch the hearing [here](#).

### **EO SUBCOMMITTEE HOLDS OVERSIGHT HEARING ON DIGITAL GI BILL**

On September 26, the Economic Opportunity (EO) Subcommittee for the House Veterans' Affairs Committee held an oversight hearing titled, "Digital GI Bill in Disarray: Holding the Biden-Harris Administration Accountable for VA's Costly Mismanagement." Representatives from VA, the VA's Office of Inspector General (OIG), and Accenture were present and provided in-person testimony. Noticeably absent was

Under Secretary for Benefits Josh Jacobs who was invited but did not attend.

In March 2021, the VA began to create a digital platform for the GI Bill. The platform would allow GI Bill claims processing and is intended to provide capabilities to improve timely and accurate delivery of educational payments and determine real-time eligibility and benefit information. Further, the platform would also provide the ability for GI Bill students to engage with VA through electronic outreach, intake, and upgraded communication tools for on-the-spot service. However, since that time, there have been significant cost overruns in the creation of the new platform and the timelines for implementation have been pushed back. The cost has more than doubled from the initial \$453 million to the current \$932 million. The OIG listed some of the contributing causes as poor contract oversight and planning, incomplete test environments, and unclear/unrealistic goals for implementation. During the hearing, Congress made clear that they would not tolerate any more cost increases and cited a definite concern with a lack of leadership accountability.

### **SUPPORTING THE VETERAN CAREGIVER COMMUNITY**

On September 25, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) held a hearing to examine support of veterans and their caregivers through programs like VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC). Much of the conversation focused on PCAFC, the unavailability of respite care, the Veterans Health Administration's budget shortfall, and the urgent need for Congress to pass the Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act.

During the hearing, it was apparent that VA's assessment of the availability of respite care differed greatly from the committee members and other witnesses. The department said the use of respite has increased exponentially in the past couple of years. According to them, it's risen 222 percent since fiscal year 2022. Normally, veterans with spinal cord injuries and disorders (SCI/D) are placed in one of VA's acute or long-term care SCI/D centers for respite. But in many parts of the country, insufficient funding coupled with



the elimination of staff positions and unfilled vacancies has severely limited the availability of respite care.

HVAC Chairman Mike Bost (IL-R) also noted that for the past 18 months or so, VA has been working on changes to the current PCAFC regulation. An announcement about the proposed regulatory reform was expected months ago. The chairman discussed this in his opening comments and urged the Administration to release its proposed changes as quickly as possible.

Finally, RAND, a research organization, briefed the committee about the results of their new study on caregiving. The study was released the previous day. One of their key findings was that military and veteran caregivers incur an estimated \$8,583 in annual out-of-pocket costs associated with their caregiving responsibilities. Others demonstrated the urgent need for Congress and the VA to increase access to mental health and substance use treatment for caregivers and their children. The video recording and relevant documents which include a statement for the record that PVA submitted can be viewed [here](#).

### **HOUSE HOLDS OVERSIGHT HEARING ON 988 LINE**

In July 2022, the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) partnered with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to create the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, a national emergency response line intended to be a critical resource for people experiencing a mental health crisis. When a veteran caller presses “1,” they are connected to the VCL.

On September 18, the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee (HVAC), Subcommittee on Health [held an oversight hearing](#) examining the operations and effectiveness of the VCL. Testifying on behalf of the VA was Dr. Matthew Miller, Executive Director of Suicide Prevention. The panel also included Dr. Julie Kroviak, Principal Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Healthcare Inspections on behalf of the Office of Inspector General (OIG).

Recent data shared by Dr. Miller in his testimony illustrated the demand for well-trained VCL staff and for

robust mental health services offered by the VA. In the two years since standing up the 988 line, the VCL has seen an increase of 22.7 percent in calls per day, a 76.7 percent increase in texts per day, and a 27.5 percent increase in the chat feature offered through the platform. The higher utilization of the VCL has led to increased demand for staffing. Currently, the VCL has 1,078 full time employees. Additionally, the number of Crisis Responders has increased from 542 in February 2021 to 1,084 in August 2024.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, the VCL is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 356 days a year by call, text, or chat features. You can press 1 to be connected to the VCL or stay on the line to be connected to a counselor.

### **NEWS OF NOTE**

#### **NDRN to Hold Virtual Premiere for Documentary on Barriers to Voting**

On October 10, the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN) will be premiering their film, “Accessing Democracy.” This interview-style documentary allows voters with disabilities to communicate the barriers they face when performing activities of daily living and receiving necessary services. The non-partisan documentary also provides voters with disabilities with the platform to express what they want from their next commander in chief. [Registration](#) for the virtual premiere is now open.

#### **SSA Releases 2024 Action Plan Detailing its Efforts to Improve Operations**

On August 14, the Social Security Administration (SSA) released its [2024 Action Plan](#). The plan lays out 27 of the SSA’s top priorities for the remainder of the year. SSA Commissioner Martin O’Malley states that action on each of the initiatives has already begun and some of the strategic initiatives will need beyond the end of the year to be fully accomplished. These priorities stem from over 5,000 recommendations made by employees and internal and external stakeholders.



The initiatives include strategies to improve the employee and customer service experience, reduce occurrence of overpayments, harmonize policies and communications with other government agencies, and more. As part of this plan, the agency has already finalized rulemaking to simplify programs related to disability insurance. While the plan is active, the Commissioner O'Malley notes that the SSA's efforts require enactment of the Administration's fiscal year 2025 budget request for SSA and other important investments.

### **DOD Commits \$500 Million for Women's Health Research, Supports Better Care for All Women**

On September 23, the Department of Defense (DOD) announced it was committing \$500 million to women's health research in hopes that the research conducted would help address women's health disparities. DOD plans to further the research effort by collaborating with the VA through the joint DOD/VA Health Executive Committee and the Women's Health Research Collaborative to explore opportunities to promote joint efforts to advance women's health research and improve evidence-based care for women in uniform. You can read the press release [here](#).

### **EO Subcommittee Ranking Member Meets with Veterans Organizations**

In late September, Associate Legislative Directors Jeremy Villanueva and Julie Howell participated in a quarterly stakeholder engagement meeting with House Veterans' Affairs, Economic Opportunity (EO) Subcommittee Ranking Member Mike Levin (D-CA) to discuss policy areas relevant to the subcommittee. Topics addressed were the need for Congress to pass H.R. 8371, the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act, the need for increased oversight on disabled veteran employment and appropriate workplace accommodations, and policy areas that might take center stage in the next session of Congress.

## **SURVEYS & HEARINGS**

### **Accessible Air Travel: Survey**

The Human Engineering Research Laboratories in Pittsburgh is conducting a national survey about accessible air travel. The study aims to estimate the pent-up demand for air travel among mobility device users and identify the specific needs and pain points experienced during their travel. Your participation will provide valuable insights that can help improve the accessibility and overall travel experience for mobility device users. The survey should take no more than 20 minutes to complete. To take the survey, please [click here](#).

### **Veterans' Committee Activities**

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