



# Washington Update

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

## PVA RELEASES 2025 POLICY PRIORITIES

With a new Congress and a new Administration in Washington, D.C., PVA's priorities for 2025 are focused on ensuring access to the care and benefits PVA members have earned and the civil rights protections they deserve. We look forward to working with our champions to move these priorities forward throughout the year.

Our priorities for 2025 are as follows:

- Protect VA's Specialized Health Care Services
- Increase Access to Long-Term Services and Supports for Veterans with SCI/D
- Improve Veterans' Financial Security
- Enhance Access to Health Care Services for Veterans with SCI/D
- Defend the Freedoms of Veterans with Disabilities

For more details on each of the priorities, please click [here](#).

## NEW CONGRESS—"FULL RESTART"

The 119th Congress is officially underway. All unpassed bills from the previous Congress must be reintroduced. We are working with the authors of bills addressing PVA's legislative priorities to make that happen. It's

important to remember that bill numbers and titles may change as part of the process.

The House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) leadership remains the same, but some of its members have changed. For example, the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee's former Ranking Member, Rep. Mike Levin (D-CA), moved to the House Appropriations Committee and will be working on its MILCON/VA Subcommittee. This is the subcommittee that allocates funding for the VA. Another HVAC member, Rep. Frank Mrvan (D-IN) who served as the Ranking Member of the HVAC's Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, will be joining him. A third Democratic member, Rep. Greg Landsman (D-OH), left the HVAC to serve on the House Energy and Commerce Committee. Three new members, all doctors—Rep. Maxine Dexter (D-OR), Rep. Herb Conaway (D-NJ) and Rep. Kelly Morrison (D-MN), were chosen to replace them. Conaway is a veteran. Reps. Abe Hamadeh (R-AZ), Kimberlyn King-Hinds (R-Northern Mariana Islands), and Tom Barrett (R-MI) are joining the HVAC as new Republican members. Rep. Hamadeh and Rep. Barrett are veterans.

Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KS) is now the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman and Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) has been selected as the new Ranking Member. Joining the committee as members of the majority are Sens. Jim Banks (R-IN) and Tim Sheehy (R-MT). Sen. Banks is currently serving in the U.S. Navy



Reserve and Sen. Sheehy is a veteran. On the minority side, Senators Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), Ruben Gallego (D-AZ), and Elissa Slotkin (D-MI) are now members of the committee. Sen. Duckworth and Sen. Gallego are veterans who served in Iraq.

### **PRESIDENT SIGNS VETS SAFE TRAVEL LEGISLATION**

On January 4, President Biden signed an amended version of the VETS Safe Travel Act (H.R. 7365). This bipartisan legislation, introduced by Rep. Paul Gosar (R-AZ) and Sen. Todd Young (R-IN), provides free access to TSA Pre✓® for certain eligible veterans who otherwise meet the requirements of the program. Prior to passage in the House, the bill was amended to limit eligibility to veterans with service-connected disabilities. In order to be eligible, the veteran must meet all of the requirements for TSA Pre✓® and be service connected for limb loss, paralysis, or permanent blindness and as a result use a wheelchair, prosthetic limb, or other assistive device to aid with mobility.

### **THE ELIZABETH DOLE ACT IS NOW LAW!**

On January 2, President Biden signed S. 141, the [Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act](#) into law, bringing an end to PVA's long effort to pass this legislation. Now, our focus will shift toward implementing its many provisions which include eliminating the cap on how much VA can pay for home care. The law also expands services to better support caregivers, such as providing them with respite and mental health care to ensure their well-being and that of their families. Other provisions require the VA to develop a plan that allows for same-day appointment scheduling and create a pilot program that enables veterans with chronic health conditions to access dental care. It also enhances stipends for some of VA's education programs and tightens oversight of educational providers serving veterans. Additionally, it broadens eligibility for burial allowances and revises definitions for certain surviving spouses.

PVA is extremely grateful to Congress for passing this important legislation supporting the families and caregivers of our nation's veterans, especially those with catastrophic injuries and diseases, like MS and ALS. Their

bipartisan effort reflects a shared commitment to honoring the sacrifices of those who have served by ensuring they and their caregivers receive the vital supports they desperately need.

### **PRESIDENT SIGNS EXPLORE ACT INTO LAW**

On January 4, President Biden signed the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences (EXPLORE) Act (H.R. 6492) into law. The EXPLORE Act improves access and increases outdoor recreation opportunities for various groups, including people with disabilities and veterans. The law directs the Secretary of the Interior to carry out a comprehensive assessment of outdoor recreation facilities on federal recreational lands and waters and high-priority trails to determine the accessibility of the facilities and trails. The Secretary must also select locations to develop new accessible trails and make modifications to transform existing trails into accessible trails. Additionally, maps and signage for new trails must be consistent with federal laws and accessibility guidelines. The law also mandates the selection of locations for the creation of new accessible recreational opportunities (biking, rock climbing, water activities, etc.) that comply with federal laws.

A different section of the law directs the Interior Secretary to seek partnerships with the VA and the Department of Defense to develop educational and public awareness materials. These materials should include information on free opportunities for members of the Armed Forces and veterans to access federal recreational lands. The law also strongly encourages hiring veterans in all positions related to the management of federal recreational lands and waters.

### **VETERANS BENEFITS IMPROVEMENT ACT SIGNED INTO LAW**

On December 23, 2024, President Biden signed the Veterans Benefits Improvement Act into law. This legislation was originally introduced in the Senate on July 26, 2023, as S. 2513 by Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT). The Veterans Benefits Improvement Act intends to improve the VA's claims and appeals process by temporarily adding three judges to the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, establishing an internship program at the Board of Veterans' Appeals to recruit law school

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students, improve and modernize the VA's Disability Benefits Questionnaires, and allow VA examination contractors to contact the veteran's accredited representative (in addition to the veteran) when scheduling appointments amongst other issues. To read more about the new law's provisions, click [here](#).

### **VA PUBLISHES PROPOSED CAREGIVER RULE**

On December 6, 2024, the VA published its much-anticipated proposed rulemaking which would improve the department's Caregiver Programs. The overwhelming majority of their proposed changes would affect the department's current Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC), such as eliminating the onerous requirement that a veteran require assistance with an activity of daily living each time it is performed in order to qualify for the program. Another proposed change expands PCAFC eligibility criteria to include more veterans who have a serious injury or who meet the standards of individual unemployability (IU). Additionally, eligibility for the program would be reassessed every two years, rather than every year, allowing participants to continue receiving services for a longer period of time. Another proposed change would allow VA to conduct home visits via telehealth during any emergency declared by a federal, state, or local authority involving certain safety or public health risk.

VA welcomes your feedback to help them shape the final version of these changes. The public has until February 4 to submit their comments to the proposed rule, which you can find [here](#). PVA has worked with VA over the past few years to develop some of these proposed changes and will submit comments to the department.

### **DOT ISSUES FINAL RULE ON PUBLIC RIGHTS-OF-WAY GUIDELINES**

The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) published a final rule on accessibility standards under the Americans with Disabilities Act for transit stops in public rights-of-way. The rule adopts the Access Board's Public Rights-of-Way Guidelines (PROWAG). The Access Board published the standards in August 2023, but the

standards could not be enforced until adopted by DOT and the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). Notably, DOT's enforcement authority covers transit facilities and services. DOJ must also adopt the standards to fully enforce the guidelines in all public rights-of-way.

DOT's standards will apply to new construction and alterations of transit stops in the public right-of-way. A public right-of-way is public land acquired for, or dedicated to, transportation purposes. Under the final rule, a transit stop is defined as an area designated for passengers to board or alight from buses, rail cars, and other transportation vehicles that operate on a fixed route or scheduled route, including bus stops and boarding platforms. The final rule requires newly constructed and altered transit stops in the public right-of-way to comply with PROWAG. The guidelines are effective January 17.

### **CONGRESS EXTENDS GOVERNMENT FUNDING THROUGH MID-MARCH**

On December 20, 2024, Congress passed a second continuing resolution (CR) to keep the government funded through March 14. It also contained language codifying VA's Veteran Experience Office and providing greater oversight of the department's accounting procedures. The latter provision requires VA leaders to regularly meet with the members of the VA committees for the next three years to provide updates on the agency's finances. Further, it withholds bonuses to senior VA leaders whenever financial shortfalls exist.

Most notably, the CR did not include the \$6.6 billion in additional funding that VA said it needed for veterans health care for the current fiscal year. Congressional leaders are still reviewing VA's request for the extra money and we are hopeful that they will address the shortfall in legislation funding the government beyond March 14.

### **THINK DIFFERENTLY BILLS ENACTED INTO LAW**

Three bipartisan bills introduced by Rep. Marcus Molinaro (R-NY) as part of his Think DIFFERENTLY initiative to remove barriers in key areas of society for individuals with disabilities have been signed into law.

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On January 4, President Biden signed the Think Differently Database Act (H.R. 670/S. 4174) into law. This legislation requires the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services to establish a publicly available website with information on Medicaid caregiving services and programs. This website must include information on eligibility, points of contact, waitlists, and covered long-term services.

The Think Differently About Building Accessibility Act (H.R. 9313) was included as Section 2308 of the bipartisan Thomas R. Carper Water Resources Development Act of 2024 (S. 4367). This legislation was also signed into law by the President on January 4. Section 2308 requires the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to report on compliance with the Architectural Barriers Act of buildings owned and leased by the General Services Administration.

Finally, in November 2024, the Think Differently About Emergencies Act (H.R. 6249) was signed into law. It requires the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the GAO to conduct a review of assistance and resources provided to individuals with disabilities and their families who are impacted by major disasters. Under this law, FEMA and the GAO must also provide recommendations to Congress on improvements to such assistance and resources.

## NEWS OF NOTE

### Veterans in the 119th Congress

The 119th Congress began with 100 members who had military experience, which is the largest number of [lawmakers who are veterans](#) in eight years. Two of them (Vice President JD Vance and Rep. Michael Waltz) have left to assume their respective roles in the new Administration. The remaining numbers are as follows: 19 are in the Senate and 79 are in the House. Of those, 26 are Democrats and 72 are Republicans. Experts say the increased number of veterans in Congress reflects a shift in political influence from older generations of veterans to the post-9/11 population.

### David Capozzi Confirmed for Amtrak Board of Directors

At the end of the 118th Congress, the Senate confirmed David Capozzi as a member of the Amtrak Board of Directors. Capozzi is the former Executive Director of the U.S. Access Board, former National Advocacy Director for PVA, and a wheelchair user. His appointment satisfies a new statutory requirement for Amtrak to have a designated disability advocate on its board.

### PVA Participates in SVA's NatCon

Early this month, Student Veterans of America (SVA) held their annual conference in Colorado Springs, Colorado. NatCon is the largest gathering of student veterans each year and is attended by several veterans service organizations (VSO).

One of the popular sessions each year is a "Meet Your VSO Panel," which PVA Associate Legislative Director Julie Howell participated in again this year. PVA also participated in a "Policy Think-Tank" session, assisting student veterans to think critically about issues impacting their communities and how to draft creative solutions.

## SURVEYS & COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES

### Survey on Airport Disability Access

It's been nearly 35 years since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. While airports have continued to keep pace with the changing requirements under this law, some airports have exceeded regulatory requirements to make their airports more accessible for all users through various guest experience programs, facility design choices, and amenities. Now, researchers are conducting a survey to identify exemplary airports. The survey is part of an Airport Cooperative Research Project (ACRP) Synthesis project. The ACRP is funded by the Federal Aviation Administration and sponsored by the Transportation Research Board. The survey responses will be compiled and included in a report, but participants will be anonymous. The survey should take





about 5 minutes to complete. Click [here](#) to take the survey.

### **Veterans' Committee Activities**

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