



Washington Update

Check out [PVA's new webpage on caregiving](#) and two new advocacy videos that highlight the [concerns in finding quality home care](#) and the [limitations of VA programs](#).

PVA NATIONAL PRESIDENT ROBERT THOMAS, JR. TESTIFIES BEFORE CONGRESS

On March 6, PVA National President Robert Thomas, Jr. testified before a joint session of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees regarding PVA's public policy priorities. During the hearing, he stressed the need for comprehensive support systems and policies that address the unique challenges faced by our nation's veterans with catastrophic injuries and diseases. President Thomas fervently advocated for legislative initiatives aimed at enabling and empowering disabled veterans, their families, and caregivers. He increased the impact of his message by referencing real-life challenges faced by actual PVA members, like [U.S. Army Veteran/PVA National Vice President Anne Robinson and her husband, Harry](#), who are among those unable to hire direct care workers due to the low pay and labor shortages. Throughout his testimony, President Thomas addressed several key policy priorities, including the dire need to protect and strengthen VA's specialized systems of care; address staffing shortages; expand access to long-term care services; improve availability of home and community-based services; and enhance VA benefits for paralyzed veterans and their survivors.

During the Q&A session, President Thomas was invited to comment on the process that SCI/D veterans must follow to get assistive devices through VA and how the Veterans Spinal Trauma Access to New Devices Act

(Veterans STAND Act) (H.R. 6373) would improve this process. The STAND Act seeks to improve veterans' access to assistive devices that promote independence and mobility. It also directs the VA to do a better job reaching out to SCI/D veterans about the importance of having annual medical exams. President Thomas testified that technologies that improve mobility and independence are great to have and noted that they are improving constantly. Also, he noted that annual exams are extremely important to maintaining the health and wellbeing of SCI/D veterans.

The two-panel hearing lasted nearly three and a half hours. At the start of the second panel, former Senator Elizabeth Dole talked briefly about the [Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act](#), which is now part of an omnibus package of veterans-related legislation currently being negotiated between the House and Senate. She spoke of the bill's importance and urged the two chambers to work together to pass it quickly. You can watch a recording of the hearing [here](#). Senator Dole's comments begin around the 1:26:00 mark and President Thomas's oral statement follows shortly thereafter. His full written statement is located [here](#).

PVA'S ELECTED LEADERS HIT THE HALLS OF CONGRESS

Last week, PVA National President Robert Thomas, Jr. and members of PVA's Executive Committee



participated in several meetings on Capitol Hill to discuss PVA's 2024 legislative priorities. The meetings coincided with President Thomas's testimony on March 6 before a joint session of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees.

PVA's leaders covered the House and the Senate, meeting with several member offices who sit on the Veteran Affairs' Committees and members who sit on the Appropriations Committees. The bipartisan meetings were a success and our leaders were able to share their experiences at the VA with members of Congress as well as their staff. There were also opportunities to meet with both majority and minority staff for each chamber's Committee on Veteran Affairs'.

The meetings were well received and they provided our leaders with the chance to share their stories and their unique experiences using the VA and the SCI/D system of care in support of PVA's top policy priorities and the funding priorities of the Independent Budget. You can review the 2024 policy priorities [here](#) and the recently released Independent Budget [here](#).

COMMENT PERIOD OPEN FOR DOT PROPOSAL ON IMPROVING THE AIR TRAVEL EXPERIENCE FOR WHEELCHAIR AND SCOOTER USERS

The U.S. Department of Transportation's (DOT) notice of proposed rulemaking on ensuring safe accommodations for wheelchair users in air travel is now open for comment. The proposed rule is based in large part on PVA's February 2022 DOT petition to initiate rulemaking authority, as well as follow up letters on the topic. The changes proposed by DOT include several vital steps that would dramatically improve the air travel experience for people with disabilities. Now we need your help!

WHO: PVA needs you to help us keep #PushingAccessForward.

WHAT: Send your comments in response to the DOT's [proposed changes](#) to the Air Carrier Access Act rules that would improve the air travel experience for wheelchair and scooter users.

WHEN: Now until May 13, 2024.

WHERE: [Federal Register :: Ensuring Safe Accommodations for Air Travelers With Disabilities Using Wheelchairs.](#)

WHY: The disability community needs to let the DOT know why better training is needed to stop injuries and wheelchair damage, and why you need your assistive device fixed or replaced as soon as possible if it's damaged or lost.

HOW: Leave [comments on the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking \(NPRM\)](#) and post on social media to share stories about your #Flightmares and why air travel must improve for wheelchair and scooter users.

ADMINISTRATION'S FY 2025 VA BUDGET PROPOSAL RELEASED

On March 11, the White House released its fiscal year (FY) 2025 budget request to Congress. Overall, it proposes \$7.3 trillion in total spending including \$369.3 billion for the VA. The latter figure includes \$134.0 billion in discretionary spending and \$235.3 billion in mandatory spending. The mandatory funding portion includes \$24.5 billion from the Cost of War Toxic Exposures Fund (TEF). Congress authorized the TEF in 2022 to cover the cost of health care and benefits associated with exposures to environmental hazards in the military. Specifically, the Administrations' proposal would provide:

- \$112.6 billion to fully fund inpatient, outpatient, mental health, and long-term care services. It includes \$17 billion to increase access to quality mental health care and lower the cost of mental health services for veterans, with the goal of helping them take charge of their treatment and live full, meaningful lives. Another \$583 million would be used to further advance the Administration's veteran suicide prevention initiatives, including continued support of the 988 Veterans Crisis Line (Dial 988, press 1) and additional support for VA's National Suicide Prevention Strategy.
- \$1.1 billion towards women's gender-specific care. More women are choosing VA health care than ever before, with women accounting for over 30 percent of the increase in enrolled

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veterans over the past five years. These investments support comprehensive specialty medical and surgical services for women veterans, improve maternal health outcomes, increase access to infertility counseling and assisted reproductive technology, and eliminate copayments for contraceptive coverage. The budget also improves the safety of women veterans seeking health care at VA facilities by supporting implementation of the zero-tolerance policy for sexual harassment and assault.

- \$3.2 billion to help the VA's efforts to end veteran homelessness and prevent veterans from becoming homeless in the future. This includes funding for the Department of Housing and Urban Development to expand housing vouchers to more veterans in need.
- \$4 billion to the Veterans Benefits Administration to support the continued timely processing of claims and delivery of benefits to veterans. The Administration's proposed increases in this area are extremely important because veterans are applying for benefits at record rates and VA is delivering benefits at record rates as a result of the PACT Act.
- \$2.9 billion for Caregivers Support Program which supports staffing, stipend payments, and many other services to help empower family caregivers of eligible veterans. In addition, this funding would support costs for potential program changes.
- \$2.8 billion for construction and expansion of critical infrastructure and facilities which includes \$2.1 billion for major construction and \$380 million for minor construction. The medical care budget also includes \$2.0 billion for base nonrecurring maintenance projects to address infrastructure deficiencies and prepare VA facilities for the department's new Electronic Health Record rollout.
- \$927 million total for Medical and Prosthetic Research which includes \$868 million in discretionary funding and another \$59 million from the TEF. If Congress agrees with this amount, it would be a \$57 million reduction compared to current year levels.

For the second year, the Administration is asking that VA medical care be considered as a third category within the federal discretionary budget. The Administration believes this move would allow the Congress to ensure adequate funding for veterans' health care without adversely impacting other critical programs, whether inside or outside of the VA.

You can learn more about the Administration's proposal for the VA [here](#).

FY 2024 Funding for VA Finalized

Recently, Congress passed [H.R. 4366](#), The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024, which includes VA funding for the current fiscal year (FY). The bill provides \$121 billion for VA medical care in FY 2024 to provide essential health services for more than 9.1 million veterans. This is in addition to funding previously appropriated to the Cost of War Toxic Exposures Fund (TEF) to cover the cost of health care related to toxic exposures. Some specific funding amounts are as follows:

- Rural Health: \$343 million, \$5 million more than FY 2023, to support improved access to care, including expanded access to transportation and telehealth.
- Caregiver Program: \$2.4 billion, \$556 million more than FY 2023, to help the VA implement this critical program and extend legacy participant eligibility and benefits through 2025.
- Women's Health: \$990 million, \$150 million more than FY 2023, for gender-specific health care services, as well as initiatives and improvements to healthcare facilities.
- Veteran Homelessness Prevention: \$3.1 billion, \$418 million more than in FY 2023, to support critical services and housing assistance for veterans and their families experiencing housing insecurity.
- Mental Health: \$16.2 billion, \$2.3 billion more than in FY 2023, to get veterans the mental health services they deserve. This includes \$559 million for suicide prevention outreach.

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- Child Care: \$23 million to expand the Child Care Pilot Program to eliminate barriers for veterans in need of child care while attending medical appointments.
- Medical and Prosthetics Research: \$943 million which is \$27 million more than FY 2023.

The bill also provides \$3.9 billion, a \$36 million increase over FY 2023, for the VA to administer benefits, including disability compensation benefits to 6.6 million veterans and their survivors. Another \$1.7 billion was designated for major and minor construction projects, and \$47.2 million for the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims so it can increase its capacity to adjudicate appeals in a timely manner.

DOD AND VA ANNOUNCE EXPANSION OF IVF SERVICES

Last month, we highlighted the announcement from the Department of Defense (DOD) and the VA that the departments intended to expand access to in vitro fertilization (IVF) for some veterans and servicemembers. As a reminder, longstanding DOD and VA policies required that servicemembers and veterans be able to produce their own genetic material and the benefit was only allowed for heterosexual married couples.

The DOD and VA have formally announced that both healthcare systems will soon drop the marriage requirement to access care meaning that single and same sex couples will now be able to access the benefit. Additionally, the prohibition on the use of donated genetic materials will be dropped, meaning that veterans and servicemembers can now access donations to facilitate IVF.

The VA policy for IVF has been linked to a DOD policy that originated in the 2012 National Defense Authorization Act. The policy stated that as long as appropriators authorized the resources to provide infertility treatments, then the VA and the DOD were allowed to offer the services. This year's appropriations bill included the resources to offer treatments and services and with both agencies expanding the eligibility criteria, this should allow more veterans and service

members access to the benefit. However, veterans still need to have a service connected infertility diagnosis. Thus, we will continue to push forward legislation that includes infertility services in the medical benefits package at the VA which would remove the service connection requirement. You can read the PVA press release on the announcement [here](#).

DELAWARE JUDGE RULES THAT DELAWARE'S EARLY VOTING AND PERMANENT ABSENTEE LAWS ARE UNCONSTITUTIONAL; DELAWARE DOJ TO APPEAL

On February 23, a Delaware Superior Court Judge ruled the Delaware statutes for early voting, passed in 2019, and permanent absentee voting, passed in 2010, unconstitutional. The [complaint](#), filed in February 2022, focuses on Delaware laws that allow voters to apply for "permanent absentee status," which means that voters will automatically receive absentee ballots without having to reapply every election cycle. The complaint argues that this violates the state constitution's strict requirements for absentee voting and may allow ineligible voters to cast an absentee ballot.

Delaware's Department of Justice (DOJ) intends to appeal the Superior Court decision. Attorney General (AG) Kathy Jennings informed the public that the DOJ will file a quick appeal to the decision and request a verdict in time for November's general election. Jennings emphasizes the ruling will affect severely disabled Delawareans and military members overseas who count on their permanent absentee ballot each year. The Delaware AG also clarified that this ruling does not affect Delaware's April 2 presidential primary – permanent absentee ballots will be sent out and early voting locations will be announced soon.

NEWS OF NOTE

DAV's Report on Women Veterans

On February 27, DAV (Disabled American Veterans) presented to the veteran community and congressional staff their recent report on women veterans. The report, "[Women Veterans: The Journey to Mental Wellness](#),"



contains information and data surveyed from their women members and focused on supporting women veterans' mental health and preventing suicide through gender-tailored care. You can read the report [here](#).

PVA Participates in NOVA Legislative

PVA's National Legislative Director Morgan Brown and Senior Health Policy Advisor Roscoe Butler participated in the Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs (NOVA) Legislative Seminar which was held on March 8 in Washington D.C. This year's event brought together representatives from 19 like-minded organizations from around the country plus Veterans Health Administration and congressional staff to discuss issues like fixing VA's clinical staffing shortages and on-boarding delays, so the department can remain competitive with the private sector. PVA briefed attendees on key priorities for 2024, which include protecting access to VA's specialized health care services and expanding access to VA long-term services and supports.

NCAV Comments Make Direct Impact on 2024 EAVS

In November 2023, the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) published a public comment notice for feedback on questions and improvements to the 2024 Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS). The EAC issues the EAVS to meet its obligations under the Help America Vote Act of 2002 to serve as a national clearinghouse and resource for the compilation of information with respect to the administration of federal elections. The National Coalition for Accessible Voting (NCAV) is a coalition of disability rights organizations, including PVA, working to improve voter accessibility. The EAC recently informed the NCAV that they received our public comment and made some updates to the EAVS based on the comment, specifically to questions A11f and A12f. You can find the updated survey instruments and a document on what changes were made since the last public comment period [here](#).

WEBINARS & HEARINGS

REMINDER: Promote the Vote: Voting Rights and Accessibility Requirements

On March 20 at 3:00 p.m. ET, PVA will host a webinar titled, "Promote the Vote: Voting Rights and Accessibility Requirements." Please join PVA's Government Relations team as we discuss the federal laws protecting the rights of voters with disabilities and resources pertaining to accessible voting.

During this webinar, PVA will provide an overview of how the Americans with Disabilities Act and other federal laws help ensure fairness throughout the voting process, from voter registration to election day. We will also discuss the main barriers to accessibility in the voting process and methods to overcome these barriers.

Voting is one of our nation's most fundamental rights, and veterans with disabilities deserve to execute it.

To attend the webinar, please register by clicking [here](#).

Upcoming Veterans' Committee Activities

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

