



# Washington Update

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

## PVA TESTIFIES AT SVAC HEARING ON LONG-TERM CARE

On June 7, PVA Executive Director Carl Blake appeared before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) to discuss the critical need for increased VA long-term care services. In his written statement, Blake noted that more than half of the veterans on VA's spinal cord injury registry are over the age of 65. He urged Congress to develop and implement a comprehensive plan that addresses future spinal cord injury and disorder (SCI/D) long-term care needs. He also addressed current and proposed SCI/D long-term care construction projects, and the urgent need to expand VA's Home and Community Based Services (HCBS). As part of expanded access to HCBS, he discussed the need for Congress to eliminate VA's existing cap on the amount they can pay for HCBS, so they can cover the full cost of needed services for veterans with the greatest support needs.

In his oral comments, Mr. Blake passionately stressed the importance of putting politics aside to pass critical legislation that would greatly help veterans with SCI/Ds. He said, "Our members are tired of political posturing, and election year politics that are standing in the way of much-needed reforms." He further urged members to "Just get it done. Do the right thing." You can read his entire written statement and watch a video of the hearing [here](#). His oral presentation begins around the 1:29:20 mark.

## HOUSE COMMITTEE PASSES FAA REAUTHORIZATION

On June 14, the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee unanimously passed H.R. 3935, the Securing Growth and Robust Leadership in American Aviation Act. This legislation would reauthorize the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for five years. We are pleased that the legislation includes several important provisions that will improve the air travel experience for people with disabilities. Some of these provisions include training requirements for assisting passengers with limited mobility and properly stowing assistive devices; improving the Department of Transportation's (DOT) complaint process; and addressing the need for more access standards. The bill also requires continued study into safe and secure in-cabin wheelchair restraint systems; and for DOT to perform a more in-depth analysis of mishandled wheelchairs as reported by airlines. Additionally, the legislation reauthorizes the Air Carrier Access Act Advisory Committee and includes a focus on the needs of passengers with disabilities in evacuations. The bill includes elements of the [PVA-supported Air Carrier Access Amendments Act \(ACAAA\) \(H.R. 1267\)](#) and the [MOBILE Act \(H.R. 3082\)](#). The legislation will now head to the House floor.

The Senate's FAA bill also includes several of the provisions in the House bill. It was slated to be marked up on June 15, but committee action was postponed. We are working to add elements of the ACAA (S. 545)



to the Senate bill as amendments during the Committee markup process.

### **PVA PARTICIPATES IN HEARING ON CARE COORDINATION**

On June 13, the House Veterans' Affairs, Health Subcommittee held a hearing to examine the effectiveness of VA's health care coordination efforts. Senior Health Policy Advisor Roscoe Butler represented PVA at the hearing. His testimony focused on the VA's ability to coordinate care in its spinal cord injury and disorder (SCI/D) system of care and in the community.

Mr. Butler explained how ensuring proper staffing at SCI/D spokes and hubs allows VA to more quickly and completely coordinate its care for SCI/D veterans. He also relayed PVA's concerns about the serious knowledge deficit about SCI/D care that exists in the community, and explained why many civilian facilities are simply not equipped or properly staffed to handle SCI/D patients' acute and long-term care needs. He concluded his presentation by explaining how VA's lack of SCI/D long-term care beds is severely impairing its ability to coordinate that care for veterans needing this level of assistance. He urged the Subcommittee to pass H.R. 542, the Elizabeth Dole Home and Community Based Services for Veterans and Caregivers Act, which would make critically needed improvements to VA's HCBS programs. You can watch a video of the hearing [here](#) and read Mr. Butler's written statement [here](#).

### **PVA PRESENTS SESSION ON HOTEL ACCESSIBILITY AT THE NATIONAL ADA SYMPOSIUM**

In May, Danica Gonzalves, PVA's Advocacy Attorney, presented on hotel accessibility at the [National ADA Symposium](#) in Kansas City, Missouri. The National ADA Symposium is a comprehensive conference on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The National ADA Symposium is an initiative of the ADA National Network and coordinated by the Great Plains ADA Center. The Symposium offered 91 sessions covering a wide variety of ADA topics, including accessible parks and recreation, venue accessibility, accessible transportation, and accessible housing. Ms. Gonzalves' presentation, "Hotel Accessibility Requirements under the ADA," discussed the accessibility barriers wheelchair users encounter at

hotels, ADA requirements for hotels, and how hotels can go above and beyond the minimum legal requirements. The [National ADA Network](#) and the [Great Plains ADA Center](#)'s websites offer ADA webinars, resources on ADA topics, and provide technical assistance to answer ADA questions.

### **JOINT SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING HELD ON VA TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION**

On June 6, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs and the Subcommittee on Technology Modernization, held a [joint hearing](#) focusing on technology modernization. With only one panel, the witnesses answered several rounds of questions pertaining to various information technology (IT) platforms used by the VA.

Testifying for the VA was Raymond Tellez, Acting Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for Automated Benefits Delivery. He was joined by Robert Orifici who serves as the Director, Benefits and Memorial Systems Portfolio in VA's Office of IT. Testifying for the American Federation of Government Employees was David Bump, who is a member of the National Veterans Affairs Council.

Several members stressed the need for improved and modernized IT platforms across all systems within the VA. Many also flagged the need for transparency around the increasing demand on artificial intelligence (AI) technology used in various steps of the benefits decision process. The subcommittee members pushed VA for in-depth answers to complex difficulties around rollouts, updates, and training for modified IT systems across the system.

Although the VA stressed the existence of a robust training schedule for all Veterans Benefits Administration employees using legacy platforms as well as modernized systems, Mr. Bump countered these claims. He testified that the VA needed to include staff in modernization efforts. He also stressed the need for additional training and engagement to ensure technology that meets the needs of staff and veterans.

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## SECOND HOUSE HISA BILL INTRODUCED

Rep. Eric Sorensen (D-IL) recently introduced the PVA-supported Autonomy for All Disabled Veterans Act (H.R. 4047). This legislation would make much needed changes to VA's Home Improvements and Structural Alterations (HISA) grant program. His legislation would restructure the program so it offers a single rate of \$10,000 for all users and ties future grant increases to the same formula as VA's four other home modification grant programs. Currently, a lifetime HISA benefit is worth up to \$6,800 for veterans who need a housing modification due to a service-connected condition. 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. Unfortunately, Congress has not adjusted the grant rates for over a decade, even though the cost of home modifications and labor have risen more than 50 percent during the same timeframe.

A similar bill that was recently reintroduced, the Autonomy for Disabled Veterans Act (H.R. 2818), would retain the existing grant scheme by increasing the \$6,800 grant to \$10,000 and increasing the \$2,000 grant to \$5,000. It would also require VA to increase the amount of the grant in line with inflation as determined by the Consumer Price Index. PVA supports all efforts to make improvements to the HISA program.

## JUSTICE FOR ALS VETERANS ACT REINTRODUCED

VA provides Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) to qualified survivors of service members and veterans. Eligible survivors can also receive an additional \$331.84 per month in DIC in cases where a veteran who, at the time of death, was in receipt of or was entitled to receive compensation for a service-connected disability that was rated totally disabling for a continuous period of at least eight years. This extra payment is commonly referred to as the "DIC kicker." Unfortunately, the surviving spouses of veterans diagnosed with ALS rarely qualify for the kicker due to the aggressive nature of the disease.

H.R. 3790/S. 1590, the Justice for ALS Veterans Act, has been reintroduced in the House and Senate. Both bills would make future surviving spouses eligible for the higher rate of DIC. The House version would also direct VA to study and advise Congress on other conditions that might warrant similar consideration for the DIC kicker. The additional language addresses past concerns by some lawmakers who felt other conditions deserved similar consideration. PVA agrees other conditions should be considered, but the review should not delay payment to the surviving spouses of veterans who pass away from ALS.

## NEWS OF NOTE

### New House Bills Expanding VA Work-Study Program Introduced

Recently, PVA endorsed a set of bills introduced by Rep. Matt Cartwright (D-PA) that would make long-needed improvements to VA's work-study program. VA work-study is a program offered to student veterans enrolled in education benefits as a way to earn money and gain work experience while attending school.

The first bill is the Student Veteran Work Study Modernization Act of 2023 (H.R. 3600), which would create a five-year pilot program that would expand eligibility to student veterans enrolled at half-time. This provision would have a big impact on student veterans with disabilities or who have a family, as full-time enrollment is often a challenge for some. Additionally, it would require the VA to provide work-study data to Congress, including the number of participating veterans, the number of students who earn a four-year degree, and the number of student veterans who obtain full-time work within the VA.

The second bill is the VA Work Study Improvement Act of 2023 (H.R. 3601). This bill would allow student veterans to participate in the work-study program while working in settings, such as nonprofits and state agencies, which are currently not authorized. The legislation would also ensure student veterans are paid the highest rate of compensation after comparing federal, state, and local rates. Lastly, it would finally authorize electronic timesheets.

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If passed, these bills would drastically improve the VA work-study program as well as the experience for the student veterans, and dependents, who rely on this program to supplement their life outside of the classroom and improve their employment situation.

### **Update on Wheelchair Spot Inside the Cabin**

In early June, at the annual Hamburg, Germany Aircraft Exhibition, Delta Flight Products (DFP), a wholly-owned subsidiary of Delta Air Lines, debuted a full prototype of a first-of-its-kind airplane seat that allows customers who use a power wheelchair to remain in it for the entire journey. DFP has partnered with UK-based consortium Air4All on the seat, which converts a standard passenger seat to an accommodation for wheelchair restraint. The product also enables airlines to retain the design of their cabin on every seat. Following the exhibition, the seat will be sent for final design and validation. Testing and certification programs to install the seat will begin once certified. More information is available [here](#).

### **Million Veteran Program Update**

The Million Veteran Program (MVP) is only 50,000 veterans away from reaching the historic milestone of enrolling one million veterans. You can be part of history and help shape the future of health for veterans by joining MVP today. Learn more [here](#).

## **HEARINGS, SURVEYS, AND WEBINARS**

### **Reminder: Hoteling While Disabled – We Want to Hear Your Stories!**

Ever feel frustrated because a hotel website doesn't provide enough – or any – information regarding accessibility? Tired of having to call and get the run-around just to find out which room has the accessibility features you need? How about the time you showed up and they'd given away the accessible room or the hotel didn't have one at all? We want to hear about your experiences! Please fill out the [survey](#) on hoteling while disabled.

The Supreme Court is hearing a case about whether a person who investigates hotel websites – sometimes called a “tester” – should be allowed to sue when the website does not have the required information about accessible rooms and accommodations. Disability rights advocates are writing a brief to the Court and want to include as many stories as possible of the realities of traveling with a disability. Specifically, how hard it is to make hotel reservations and secure a room with accessibility features because of the lack of information about accessibility on hotel websites. You can help educate the Court by sharing your experiences of traveling with a disability. Please fill out the [survey](#) by June 30.

### **Recorded Webinar Now Available: Advocacy Through Effective Complaints**

Complaints are an effective tool to magnify advocates' voices and can result in more immediate action to remove accessibility barriers and modify discriminatory policies. The recorded webinar, “Advocacy Through Effective Complaints,” presented by PVA's Advocacy Attorney, Danica Gonzalves, outlines concrete steps to documenting barriers, filing complaints with companies, collaborating with companies to improve accessibility, and other successful advocacy tools. The webinar explains how complaints result in systematic change and accessibility barrier removal. The webinar recording and presentation materials are posted on [PVA's website](#), along with other informative webinars that cover disability laws and advocacy.

### **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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