



# Washington Update

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

## VA FUNDING UPDATE

The Senate is currently deliberating a minibus package that would provide Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 funding for military construction and the VA, as well as the Agriculture, Transportation, and Housing and Urban Development Departments. Hundreds of amendments were proposed to the measure, and the chamber has already accepted several veteran-related ones that would increase VA's telehealth capacity; restrict VA's ability to change special mode of transportation rates; and expand the access of women veterans to mobile mammography initiatives and advanced mammography equipment. Other amendments that will be incorporated into the bill direct VA to inform Congress on its use of third-party contractors to conduct medical disability exams and provide details on the cost and schedule of their new electronic health record project.

Meanwhile, the House is now resuming its own efforts to pass FY 2024 funding legislation. The chamber has passed four of the twelve annual appropriations bills, so they have a significant amount of work to do as well. Significant differences in terms of overall amounts and specific allocation of funds exist between the two chambers. The House and Senate may reach agreement and pass legislation funding part of the government, but Congress will likely need to pass another short-term continuing resolution (CR) to cover the rest. The current CR runs out on November 17.

## JOINT SENATE HEARING EXAMINES TRANSITION PROCESS

On October 18, the Senate Armed Services and Veterans' Affairs Committees held a joint hearing to examine military to civilian transition processes. Much of the three-hour hearing focused on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) which is run jointly by the VA, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Labor. Witnesses included representatives from all three agencies, the Government Accountability Office, and a small group of veterans' advocates.

A broad range of subjects were touched on during the question and answer portion of the hearing such as the availability of mental health care during the transition process, the interoperability of electronic health records between DOD and VA, and ways to get service members to start thinking about their civilian life earlier in their military careers. There was also discussion around DOD ensuring that transitioning service members are able to enroll in TAP courses at least a year out from the date of their separation.

One subject that came up during both witness panels was the need to fully integrate accredited veterans service organization representatives into the TAP process. The importance of veterans having assistance from an accredited representation cannot be overstated. PVA's accredited Service Officers specialize in providing services for veterans and service members who are severely injured or suffer disabling diseases.



These services are free of charge and are offered from the time of disability to end of life.

Improving the transitioning of families, with emphasis on taking better care of spouses, is another area that drew considerable attention. DOD has a number of programs to help military spouses with employment while the service member is actively serving, but offers little assistance to them when the military member transitions back to civilian life. The hearing was recorded and you can watch a video of it [here](#).

### SEARCH FOR NEW SPEAKER DELAYS VETERAN-RELATED HEARINGS

On October 25, the House ended a three-week long period of legislative inactivity with the election of Rep. Mike Johnson (R-LA) as the chamber's 56th Speaker. Prior to the vote, the chamber was essentially paralyzed because existing rules prevented lawmakers from acting on legislation until a new leader was chosen. The lapse in leadership also delayed a pair of House Veteran's Affairs Committee (HVAC) hearings looking at pending legislation.

The HVAC, Economic Opportunity Subcommittee legislative hearing has been rescheduled for November 2. The HVAC, Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) Subcommittee legislative hearing has been rescheduled for November 8. PVA provided a statement for the record for the DAMA hearing. We will provide an overview of both hearings in the next Washington Update.

### 2023 FEDERAL EHR ANNUAL SUMMIT

On October 24, the Federal Electronic Health Record Modernization (FEHRM) office hosted the 2023 Federal EHR Annual Summit. The theme for the Summit was EHR Excellence: People, Progress and Pathways Forward. The Summit included participants from the Department of Defense (DOD) and VA end users; congressional staffers; and auditing agencies, with over 700 participants during the three-day virtual summit.

One of the presenters was Mr. Bill Tinston, Director, who oversees the FEHRM's efforts to implement a single, common federal EHR. Another presenter was Mr. Chris Ruefer, Deputy Program Executive Officer, Defense Healthcare Management Systems, who provides direct support to the Program Executive Officer and oversees multiple program offices, including the DOD Healthcare Management System Modernization. Each of these presenters, along with several others, briefed attendees on their agency's EHR deployment.

Additionally, PVA's Roscoe Butler, Senior Health Policy Advisor, served on a panel with representatives from other veterans service organizations to discuss the benefits and improved outcomes of the federal EHR to service members and veterans. In his remarks, Mr. Butler stated that a functioning EHR serves as a lifeline for our members in accessing care at the VA. The VA's Spinal Cord Injury/Disorder (SCI/D) System of Care is comprised of a hub and spoke system that spans the United States to meet the needs of SCI/D veterans. It is important that the EHR is interoperable and can share veteran's clinical information between each facility to ensure their medical information is readily accessible for VA providers, regardless of where they are seen. This sharing of information is crucial to ensure continuity of care.

Mr. Butler also noted that the problems resulting from implementation of the Oracle/Cerner EHR have raised serious concerns. He encouraged patience during the current reset on implementation to ensure that problems are addressed before the system is rolled out in other locations. PVA and other veterans organizations, as well as Congress, will be closely watching VA's efforts to modernize its EHR to ensure that veterans' care is not compromised by the effort.

### NEWS OF NOTE

#### **Bipartisan Senate Bill Focused on Reducing Caregiver Burden Introduced**

On October 24, Sen. Edward Markey (D-MA) and Sen. Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV) [introduced the Alleviating](#)

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[Barriers for Caregivers \(ABC\) Act \(S. 3109\)](#). This bipartisan legislation would require the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), Social Security Administration (SSA), and Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) to review their eligibility, processes, procedures, forms, and communications to reduce the administrative burden on family caregivers. The ABC Act would then annually require CMS, SSA, and CHIP to report to Congress about any issues they are facing and any next steps they are taking to support family caregivers.

PVA supports this legislation which was introduced ahead of November’s recognition of family caregivers. There are 5.5 million caregivers providing support for veterans, many of whom are family members. According to a [2020 report from AARP and the National Alliance for Caregiving](#), one in four caregivers expressed the need for help with completing paperwork and other requirements for benefits and services. PVA recently expressed similar concerns about family caregivers who serve as their veterans’ fiduciary in VA’s Fiduciary Program in a hearing before the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee.

### **New Bill Introduced to Improve Access to Home and Community-Based Services**

On October 24, Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA) and 20 cosponsors introduced the PVA-supported Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) Relief Act of 2023 (S. 3118). The HCBS Relief Act would provide dedicated Medicaid funds to states for two years to stabilize their HCBS service delivery networks, recruit and retain HCBS direct care workers, and meet the long-term service and support needs of people eligible for Medicaid HCBS. The main reason for this legislation is the lack of a sufficient direct care workforce to provide HCBS. The inability to recruit direct care workers has a direct effect on whether people with disabilities are able to receive needed services, even if funding for HCBS is available.

Under the legislation, states would receive a 10-point increase in the federal match for Medicaid for two fiscal years to enhance HCBS. Funds could be used to increase

direct care worker pay, provide benefits such as paid family leave or sick leave, and pay for transportation expenses to and from the homes of those being served. The additional funds also can be used to support family caregivers, pay for recruitment and training of additional direct care workers, and pay for technology to facilitate services.

### **DRMA Reintroduced**

On October 24, Sen. Robert Casey (D-PA) and Rep. Jimmy Panetta (D-CA) reintroduced the Disaster Relief Medicaid Act (DRMA) (H.R. 6029/S. 3120). DRMA seeks to ensure that individuals eligible for Medicaid who are forced to relocate due to a disaster are able to continue to access their Medicaid supported services. The legislation provides a limited time, 100 percent federal match for displaced individuals and technical assistance and support for states to develop innovative strategies to respond to an influx of out-of-state individuals. The bill also creates a grant program to help states develop an emergency response corps to provide home and community-based services. PVA, along with over 200 other organizations, supports this legislation.

### **WEBINARS & HEARINGS**

#### **PVA Webinar Focused on Encouraging People with Disabilities to Serve as Research Advocates Now Available**

On October 17, PVA’s Research and Education and Government Relations departments teamed up to host a webinar on the importance of people with lived experience serving as research advocates and the role they play in creating well-rounded research. The webinar titled, “Research is the Foundation for Successful Advocacy,” addressed PVA’s role in both funding research and creating clinical practice guidelines, and the importance of advocacy in research.

If you are interested in becoming a research advocate, [watch our webinar](#) to learn more about research, advocacy, and the multiple ways you can get involved to help the advancement of research, while also

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advocating for yourself and others. The [webinar slides](#) are also available for viewing.

### **Upcoming Veterans' Committee Activities**

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