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Washington Update

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

VA ANNOUNCES COMING EXPANSION OF THE COMPREHENSIVE CAREGIVER PROGRAM

VA is set to begin Phase 2 of the expansion of the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) on October 1. This phase will open the PCAFC to all eligible veterans who served after May 7, 1975, and before September 11, 2001. This final expansion will make certain service-disabled veterans, regardless of era served, eligible to apply for the PCAFC. For more information about the PCAFC, please click [here](#). If you need assistance in applying for the program or have questions, please [contact](#) your PVA service officer.

HOUSE PASSES REVISED AUTO GRANT LEGISLATION

Legislation to secure an additional automobile allowance for eligible veterans is taking a big step closer to becoming law with House passage of H.R. 3304, as amended. The revised legislation, now known as the AUTO for Veterans Act, would authorize the VA to provide an additional automobile allowance to eligible veterans if 25 years have elapsed since the date they received their first grant. Starting 10 years after the bill is signed, the timeframe will decrease and eligible veterans would be able to receive an additional grant if 10 years have passed since their first grant.

The bill would also change the definition of “medical services” to include certain vehicle modifications (e.g., van lifts) offered through VA’s Automobile Adaptive Equipment (AAE) program. This latter provision helps ensure the VA’s current support through the AAE program to veterans with non-service-connected illnesses and injuries remains available.

It took many months of deliberations to get the bill to the House floor and we thank Representatives Dan Meuser (R-PA), David Trone (D-MD), and Lizzie Fletcher (D-TX) for leading the effort to expand access to transportation for disabled veterans. We are especially grateful to House Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano (D-CA) and Ranking Member Mike Bost (R-IL) who made forward momentum possible. Access to safe, reliable transportation is essential to the health and wellness of catastrophically disabled veterans. We call on the Senate to pass this bill as soon as possible.

IVF BILL ADVANCES IN COMMITTEE

On September 21, the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs (HVAC) held a full Committee markup and advanced 13 veterans-related bills to the House floor, including top PVA priorities such as the VA Auto Grant legislation. One of the other bills considered was an amended version of H.R. 1957, the Veterans Infertility Treatment Act of 2021, which would make infertility care, including Assisted Reproductive Technology like

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IVF, part of the medical services provided by the VA to any veteran who needs infertility care to achieve a pregnancy. It would also allow IVF for up to three successful pregnancies or six attempted cycles, and repeal the ban on use of donated gametes and embryos.

HVAC also gave the “green light” to an amended version of H.R. 2521, the DOULA for VA Act of 2021, which seeks to establish a pilot program to encourage the use of doulas in the VA to support pregnant veterans and improve maternal health outcomes. The complete list of legislation approved by the Committee during the markup session can be found [here](#).

CONGRESS APPROVES FUNDING FOR NEW SCI FACILITIES

Congress recently approved H.R. 7500, the Fiscal Year 2022 Veterans Affairs Major Medical Facility Authorization Act, which will allow the VA to make necessary improvements to medical facilities. As soon as it becomes law, this bill will authorize more than \$554 million toward a new spinal cord injury (SCI) long-term care center in Dallas and a new SCI center with a community living center and parking garage in San Diego. Securing the necessary funding to maintain existing facilities and build new ones has been a fundamental part of PVA’s effort to preserve VA’s specialized systems of care. We thank Representatives Colin Allred (D-TX) and Jake Ellzey (R-TX) and Senators John Tester (D-MT) and Jerry Moran (R-KS) for introducing and successfully securing the passage of this important legislation. The law is headed to the President for his signature.

CONGRESS APPROVES VA COLA BILL

Congress recently passed H.R. 7846, the Veterans’ Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) Act of 2022, which requires the VA to increase rates for disability compensation, additional compensation for dependents, the clothing allowance for certain disabled veterans, and dependency and indemnity compensation (DIC) for surviving spouses and children. It directs the VA to increase payment amounts for these benefits by the same percentage as the cost-of-living increase in benefits for Social Security recipients which will be effective on December 1, 2022. The annual Social

Security cost-of-living adjustment is dictated by the consumer price index, which measures the rate of inflation in the U.S. The figure used to determine next year’s COLA is expected to be announced in mid-to-late October and it may be the biggest increase seen in many years.

NATIONAL STRATEGY TO SUPPORT FAMILY CAREGIVERS

On September 21, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, through its Administration for Community Living (ACL), released the [2022 National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers](#). Approximately 53 million Americans serve as family caregivers providing a wide array of assistance to loved ones who need help as they age or due to a disability or chronic condition. According to the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, five million of those individuals are caregivers to veterans. The work of caregivers enables millions of older adults and people with disabilities to remain in their communities and the value of their supports represents roughly \$470 billion a year in direct care services.

The national strategy was developed jointly by the RAISE Act Family Caregiving Advisory Council and the Advisory Council to Support Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. The advisory councils were created in 2018 with the aim of bringing greater attention to the challenges facing caregivers, exploring the programs available to support them, identifying steps for improving financial and workplace protections for caregivers, and promoting better and more consistent research and data collection.

The national strategy highlights nearly 350 actions the federal government will take to support family caregivers in the coming year and more than 150 actions that can be adopted at other levels of government and across the private sector to build a system to support family caregivers. The VA was among 15 federal agencies contributing to the strategy. Actions the VA has committed to undertake include:

- Development of a survey tool by VA’s Caregivers Support Program (CSP) to conduct a needs assessment for providers and practitioners to

- help identify and bridge gaps in existing services and resources.
- Action by VA's Office of Mental Health Operations and Suicide Prevention and CSP to connect veterans and caregivers with resources related to the Compact Act and increase skills of family caregivers of veterans with behavioral health challenges.
- Expansion of the Veteran Directed Care program in partnership with ACL and local Area Agencies on Aging to 70 additional sites to increase services to both veterans and their caregivers.
- Increased communication to enhance awareness of respite services that are available to veterans and caregivers in partnership with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation and CareLinx.
- Implementation by CSP of financial and legal services support for veterans and caregivers who participate in VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers.

Veterans are also a focus of the Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy's (ODEP) plans for implementing the national caregiver strategy. ODEP intends, through its technical assistance centers, to provide targeted technical assistance to state governments on state-level planning to support employed family caregivers, including family caregivers for veterans, to achieve the goal of incorporating employment concerns in local family caregiving strategies in Fiscal Years 2022-2025.

The strategy will be open for public comment for 60 days beginning on October 1. [Subscribe to ACL Updates](#) to receive a reminder and a link to the comment portal.

PVA TESTIFIES AT VR&E OVERSIGHT HEARING

On September 15, PVA Associate Legislative Director Julie Howell testified before the House Veterans' Affairs Economic Opportunity Subcommittee at an oversight hearing on VA's Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program. VR&E is an employment resource for service-connected veterans that engages veterans through five employment related tracks: reemployment,

rapid access to employment, self-employment, employment through long-term services, and independent living.

At the hearing, several issues were discussed such as earlier failed attempts by the program to develop a functioning case management system to assist with counselor workloads as well as engagement with veterans. Failed technical platforms have cost the VA over \$25 million.

PVA stressed that VR&E is an invaluable program for our nation's veterans, but additional attention is needed to ensure its future. We stressed that VR&E needs to increase engagement and collaboration with veterans service organizations, improve its transparency and data collection, make a greater investment in the VetSuccess on Campus program, and give more attention to the self-employment and independent living tracks.

You can watch the recording of the hearing [here](#) and read PVA's written statement [here](#).

FY 2023 FUNDING UPDATE

Congress is still working on legislation intended to keep the government funded after the end of the month. Right now, lawmakers are considering a 10-week spending bill which largely maintains current funding levels into the lame duck session of Congress. The debate is going down to the wire but Congress is expected to agree to an extension of funding before the end of the fiscal year.

PVA PRESENTS TO ALL WHEELS UP WORKING GROUP

Recently, PVA National President Charles Brown and Associate Executive Director of Government Relations Heather Ansley attended All Wheels Up's working group for a wheelchair spot on airplanes. This was the third working group event and the first meeting since the release of the Transportation Research Board's report, "[Technical Feasibility of a Wheelchair Securement Concept for Airline Travel: A Preliminary Assessment](#)." The meeting focused on in-cabin wheelchair securements and interior design to accommodate a

wheelchair spot and brought together key stakeholders for an open discussion of the issues.

Ms. Ansley presented to the group on the first day regarding the Air Carrier Access Amendments Act (H.R. 1696/S. 642) and the status of the 2023 FAA Reauthorization Act. Other presenters shared research and innovative ideas for accommodating wheelchairs in the cabin. On the second day, attendees discussed wheelchair standards and securement options as well as the business case for a wheelchair spot in the cabin. PVA served as a lead sponsor for the event.

NEWS OF NOTE

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month

“Disability: Part of the Equity Equation” is the theme for this year’s National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM). Observed in October, NDEAM celebrates the contributions of workers with disabilities and highlights supportive, inclusive employment policies, and practices. A collection of social media resources, sample materials, and ideas for organizations and employers to use in celebrating disability inclusive employment can be found [here](#).

VA Offers Flexible Debt Collection Relief

Recently, the VA [announced](#) that veterans will continue to have the option to request a temporary benefit debt suspension through December 31, 2022. The department has also made several changes to make the experience of repaying a VA debt less stressful by removing barriers to requesting debt relief. [Here](#) are five ways the VA is offering to make repaying a VA debt less stressful during difficult times.

TRICARE Pharmacy Network Shrinking in October

Nearly 14,000 community pharmacies will be leaving the TRICARE network next month. Impacted beneficiaries will receive a letter from Express Scripts with a list of alternative in-network pharmacies. Walgreens and CVS remain in-network, as do many grocery store

pharmacies and smaller chains. Learn more about this change [here](#).

HEARINGS, WEBINARS, & AUDIO CHATS

PVA Government Relations to Hold Webinar on October 14

On October 14, at 3:00 pm ET, PVA Government Relations will hold a webinar on VA's implementation of the Making Advances in Mammography and Medical Options for Veterans (MAMMO) Act, which was signed into law earlier this year.

This webinar will provide an opportunity to learn the details of the law and what it will mean for veterans. As a reminder, the MAMMO Act requires the VA to establish a strategic plan for improving breast imaging services throughout the VA, upgrade to 3D imaging technology for breast screenings, and assess the accessibility of mammography services for paralyzed and disabled veterans.

Join us and the VA to hear how the department plans to meet the needs of all veterans, including those with catastrophic injuries and illnesses, seeking improved access to effective breast screening.

To attend this webinar, please register [here](#).

REMINDER Audio Chat Now Available: PVA recently hosted an audio chat on VA's Specially Adaptive Housing grant program. To listen, please visit the Veteran Chats series [here](#).

Upcoming Veterans' Affairs Committee Action

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