



# Washington Update

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

## CONGRESS APPROVES TWO-TIERED FUNDING BILL

This week, Congress approved a two-tiered, continuing resolution (CR) that keeps the government running into early next year. The first-tier funds the departments of Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, Energy, Veterans Affairs, and Agriculture through January 19, 2024. The second-tier funds all remaining government agencies through February 2, 2024. It does not include any unpopular spending cuts or policy provisions, which allowed it to clear both chambers in a bipartisan manner.

The last CR passed at the end of September and extended government funding through November 17. None of the 12 annual appropriation bills have been approved by both chambers and the new CR buys lawmakers time to work out a more permanent funding solution for the current fiscal year. Although Congress could reach agreement on some of the regular funding bills and pass them ahead of the deadlines established in this new CR, recent trends indicate that such action would likely prove to be difficult.

## PVA SUBMITS COMMENTS ON PROPOSED RULE TO UPDATE SECTION 504 AND ACCESSIBLE MDE REQUIREMENTS

PVA, in collaboration with the Consortium for Constituents with Disabilities (CCD), submitted a [comment](#) in response to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) [proposed rule](#) to update an

antidiscrimination law and medical treatment access requirements for people with disabilities. The proposed rule amends a 50-year old law, [Section 504](#) of the Rehabilitation Act, which prohibits disability discrimination by medical facilities and providers that receive HHS-funding, like Medicare. The proposed rule included requirements for accessible medical diagnostic equipment (MDE).

PVA spearheaded the MDE comments. PVA and CCD urged HHS to adopt an enforceable standard requiring MDE to have a 17-inch low transfer height; specific requirements for providers to acquire accessible exam tables, chairs, and weight scales; and mandated staff training on the use of accessible MDE. The CCD comment, submitted November 13, was signed by over 70 national disability rights organizations.

## SVAC HOLDS HEARING ON VA RESEARCH

On November 1, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) held a hearing titled, "Foundation of Care: Examining Research at the Department of Veterans Affairs." Representing VA on the single-panel hearing was Dr. Rachel Ramoni, Chief Research and Development Officer from the Office of Research and Development. She was joined by Dr. Patricia Hastings, Chief Consultant for Health Outcomes and Military Exposures, and Dr. Sumitra Muralidhar, Program Director for the Million Veteran Program. Matthew

Kuntz, Executive Director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness Montana, also testified at the hearing.

As the only non-VA witness, Mr. Kuntz offered a unique perspective working with veterans outside of the VA health care system. Key takeaways from Mr. Kuntz's testimony were the need for VA to prioritize research concerning toxic exposures, spinal cord injuries, prosthetics, and brain health.

Several senators questioned research priorities within VA as they grappled with how long it takes research to be operationalized into improved care outcomes. Information about the Million Veteran Program was also a focus. The Million Veteran Program is a voluntary genetics project that VA has been working on for several years. Recent publications have highlighted discoveries like genetic markers shared among veterans who have died by suicide.

You can watch the hearing [here](#).

#### **WOMEN VETERAN TASK FORCE PUBLISHES FINAL REPORT**

The House Veterans' Affairs Committee's (HVAC) Women Veteran Task Force (WVTF) recently published its final report. Reauthorized earlier this year, the WVTF was an opportunity for various HVAC subcommittees to focus on women veteran issues within each area of jurisdiction.

The WVTF invited participants from several different veterans service organizations, VA, private sector experts, and individual veterans to a series of roundtables on various topics. The topics included women specific cancers and care, security at VA medical centers, access to disability benefits, and underemployment.

The report makes several recommendations to Congress and VA on ways it could better support women veterans. Key recommendations include updated training and guidance for regional office staff when it comes to processing benefits claims for women veterans, updating screening for women veterans who are vulnerable to rare cancers, improving

interoperability of sexual harassment and assault reporting at VA facilities, and working to increase GI Bill usage by women veterans.

The report can be read [here](#).

#### **DAMA SUBCOMMITTEE REVIEWS PENDING LEGISLATION**

The House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) recently held a legislative hearing to look at several pieces of pending legislation. The hearing was originally scheduled to take place on October 24, but was delayed roughly two weeks while the House worked to choose a new Speaker. Included among the 10 bills examined by the Subcommittee was H.R. 3790, the Justice for ALS Veterans Act of 2023, which would authorize payment of a higher Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) rate to surviving spouses of veterans who die from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) regardless of whether the veteran had a disability rated as totally disabling for a continuous period of at least eight years immediately preceding death. The additional rate of DIC is commonly known as the "DIC Kicker."

The Justice for ALS Veterans Act was drafted with PVA's help and this change is a key part of our efforts to improve VA benefits and services for ALS veterans and their survivors. The current version of the bill asks VA to study and inform Congress on other conditions with high mortality rates that deserve similar consideration from lawmakers. VA recommended incorporating a clearer definition of high mortality rate in the bill to ensure implementation would be consistent with congressional intent.

The Subcommittee also looked at H.R. 5890, the Review Every Veterans Claim Act of 2023, which seeks to limit the VA's authority to deny a veteran's claim solely based on the veteran's failure to appear for a medical examination associated with the claim. Thousands of veterans' claims for service connection, claims for increase, and for other benefits like Total Disability Individual Unemployability and Aid and Attendance have been denied solely on the basis of missing an examination. There are many legitimate reasons why a

veteran may not be able to attend a scheduled exam. We are also aware of numerous instances where VA contractors have erroneously recorded the veteran as a “no show.” PVA strongly supports passage of this legislation, which would ensure that a missed exam isn’t the only basis for denying a veteran’s claim.

At the request of the Subcommittee, PVA submitted a written statement for the hearing. To view the hearing or read the statement, click [here](#).

### NEWS OF NOTE

#### **Economic Opportunity Subcommittee Holds Pending Legislation Hearing**

On November 2, the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee Economic Opportunity Subcommittee held a pending legislation hearing on several pieces of legislation and a few draft bills.

Several of the bills discussed focused on improving the transition process for separating servicemembers and increasing access to commercial drivers’ licenses. Also discussed were a few student veteran bills that would improve the VA work study program, increase the housing allowance for online learning, and reduce barriers to the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship.

There was also a bill that seeks to reduce veteran suicide and another that would create a fourth administration within VA focused on economic opportunity issues such as education and employment.

One draft bill that caused strong reactions would move the Department of Labor’s (DOL) Veterans’ Employment and Training Service from DOL to the VA. Several Subcommittee members, VA and DOL, and veterans service organizations were staunchly opposed to the legislation.

You can watch the hearing [here](#).

#### **HVAC Oversight Hearing on Veteran Employment**

On November 7, the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee (HVAC) held an oversight hearing titled, “Veterans Helping Veterans: The Impact of America’s Business on Veteran Employment and Opportunity.” Several business leaders testified before the Committee and shared how their companies are making veteran employment a priority. These leaders included the directors of veteran employment programs for Walmart, Verizon, Home Depot, as well as the President of Hiring Our Heroes. Several topics arose during the hearing, such as forced arbitration clauses, gender pay gaps, advancement opportunities, and ways in which Congress can improve the employment landscape for all veterans.

You can watch the hearing [here](#).

### WEBINARS & HEARINGS

#### **Reminder: Advocacy Training Webinars Available**

PVA’s five-part series, “The 5 W’s: The who, what, where, why, and when of our government and the art of advocacy,” is now on [PVA.org](#). You can learn more about the [Fundamentals of Government](#), the [Legislative Process](#), [Stakeholders of Advocacy](#), [Understanding the Issues and Becoming a Change Agent](#), and [Connecting the Dots](#). If you have any questions about the series, please contact PVA Grassroots Advocacy Manager Lisa Elijah at [LisaE@PVA.org](mailto:LisaE@PVA.org).

#### **Upcoming Veterans’ Committee Activities**

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