



Washington Update

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

HOUSE TAKES ACTION ON CLOTHING ALLOWANCE LEGISLATION

The House is preparing to vote on H.R. 4772, the Mark O'Brien VA Clothing Allowance Improvement Act. This important legislation would make clothing allowance payments automatic until the VA determines the veteran is no longer eligible to receive the benefit. If the legislation passes the House, it will then go to the Senate for further consideration. The Senate companion bill to this legislation is S. 2513, the Brian Neuman VA Clothing Allowance Improvement Act. Please contact your senators about this legislation by clicking [here](#).

CRUNCH TIME FOR CONGRESS

Lawmakers have a limited number of legislative days remaining in the 117th Congress to tackle top priorities like funding the government beyond December 16 and passing the annual defense policy bill. Having to consider so many competing priorities in a constrained timeframe means the risk of having one of our top goals being overlooked has never been higher.

Over the Thanksgiving break, PVA and 20 other organizations urged the Senate to quickly pass H.R. 3304, the AUTO for Veterans Act, which provides eligible veterans with an additional automobile allowance and

provides statutory protections for certain services offered through VA's Automobile Adaptive Equipment program. This is now a time sensitive issue so [call](#) your senators and urge quick passage of this bill.

PVA Testifies at House Hearing on Improving Access to Air Travel

On November 17, the House Transportation and Infrastructure, Aviation Subcommittee held a hearing titled, "Accessible Air Travel: Addressing Challenges for Passengers with Disabilities." The hearing featured testimony from Rep. Jim Langevin (D-RI) who is retiring this year and is the sponsor for the [Air Carrier Access Amendments Act \(H.R. 1696\)](#). Rep. Langevin spoke of the difficulties he has encountered as a wheelchair user in air travel and the need for reform.

Heather Ansley, Associate Executive Director of Government Relations, testified on behalf of PVA. Ms. Ansley noted that the major problem with commercial air travel is that aircraft are required to have very few accessible features. She urged Congress to make systemic improvements in air travel in the next FAA Reauthorization by including the Air Carrier Access Amendments Act. She also called on Congress to include language directing appropriate agencies and administrations to take the next steps as outlined in a September 2021 [report](#) on in cabin wheelchair restraint systems.



Other witnesses included Brian Ryks, Executive Director and CEO Metropolitan Airports Commission (Minneapolis/St. Paul) on behalf of Airports Council International—North America; Matt Scott, Paralympian, Team USA; Heather Krause, Director, Physical Infrastructure, Government Accountability Office; and Graham Keithley, Vice President and Associate General Counsel, Airlines for America. To watch the hearing, please click [here](#). To read the testimony from all of the witnesses, please click [here](#).

SENATE VETERANS' COMMITTEE EXAMINES PACT ACT IMPLEMENTATION

The Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act (P.L. 117-168), which expands VA health care and benefits for veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic substances, was signed into law in August. On November 16, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee held a hearing to learn from top VA officials about the implementation of this important legislation. Dr. Shereef Elnahal, VA Under Secretary for Health, led the panel of VA witnesses who fielded a number of questions from Committee members about the law.

Dr. Elnahal told the Committee that VA is working quickly to implement many of the provisions of the PACT Act. He outlined three key priorities: reaching every veteran who may qualify for the new care and benefits; building capacity to meet the needs of every veteran seeking VA care; and initiating internal changes to help VA deal with these issues in the future. He said VA is putting out information about the bill through every means possible and that the Department is using all of the authorities granted by Congress to hire more people, and to bring them on board quickly. He also discussed the [new toxic exposure screening](#) for veterans, which VA recently initiated.

Another witness, Mr. Joshua Jacobs, Senior Advisor for Policy Performing the Delegable Duties of the Under Secretary for Benefits, spoke of the Department's advanced preparation for the Act's passage and ongoing efforts to hire and train more claims processors. He also detailed additional steps that the VA will be using to process claims which are being filed in record numbers.

Many of the questions that followed centered on the Department's ability to provide care for increasing numbers of veterans seeking care for their toxic exposures. Dr. Elnahal and other VA witnesses stressed that VA has aggressively implemented and is using many of the new hiring authorities granted by Congress. For example, since the bill was passed, they have hired 700 more housekeeping aides.

Committee members were especially concerned with VA's efforts to get the word out about the law and veterans' potential eligibility for new benefits or services. Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) asked about VA's efforts to inform younger women veterans of the necessity to be screened for breast cancer and Sen. Maggie Hassan (D-NH) inquired how VA is coordinating with the Defense Department to ensure that service members are aware of the PACT Act as they leave the military. Dr. Elnahal noted breast cancer is a type of "reproductive cancer" potentially covered by the Act. Also, VA is using multiple media platforms to reach women veterans and active duty servicemembers alike in addition to the Transition Assistance Program for the latter group. Some lawmakers also expressed concern with various organizations taking advantage of the Camp Lejeune Act which was a provision of the larger PACT Act.

PVA SUBMITS COMMENTS ON ACCESSIBILITY OF SSTMS AND SELF-SERVICE KIOSKS

The U.S. Access Board, the agency charged with setting standards for disability accessibility guidelines, issued an Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPRM) for accessibility requirements of self-service transaction machines (SSTMs) and self-service kiosks. The requirements would cover built-in SSTMs and kiosks at grocery stores, drug stores, restaurants, health care provider offices, and other establishments that provide public services. The ANPRM comment period ended on November 21.

PVA submitted comments urging the Board to expand the definition of the devices covered under the standards; ensure that people with disabilities can access the devices with the same independence and privacy as those without disabilities; and require

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government agencies only use fully accessible devices. PVA's comments also recommended that SSTMs and self-service kiosks accept contactless payment methods and described how inaccessible devices impact individuals with disabilities. After the Board reviews all comments submitted, the agency may choose to issue an NPRM and proceed with the rulemaking process. If an NPRM is issued, interested parties will have the opportunity to submit comments. If promulgated, the Board's final rule will set minimum accessibility standards for SSTMs and self-service kiosks, but such standards must be adopted by the U.S. Department of Justice to be enforceable for state and local governments and public accommodations.

WOMEN VETERANS TASK FORCE MEETS TO DISCUSS OVERSIGHT OF DEBORAH SAMPSON ACT PROVISIONS

On November 17, the House Women Veterans Task Force met to discuss implementation of several provisions within the Deborah Sampson Act. These sections were passed in early 2021 as part of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans' Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-315). They address inequities experienced by women veterans in accessing VA health care and benefits.

Much of the conversation centered on portions of the law that established pilot programs to gauge the feasibility of providing childcare and assist survivors of intimate partner violence. Another section that was discussed would help eliminate harassment and assault throughout the VA.

Rep. Julia Brownley (D-CA), Chair of the House Veterans' Affairs, Health Subcommittee, led the roundtable. She was joined by Rep. Lois Frankel (D-FL) and Rep. Nancy Mace (R-SC). Staff from the VA and many other congressional offices participated as well.

While providing childcare for veterans at VA facilities is still in its early stages of implementation, the offices for [Assault and Harassment Prevention](#) and the [Intimate Partner Violence Assistance Program](#) are making great strides to increase outreach and engagement throughout the VA.

NEWS OF NOTE

PVA Comments on NIDILRR Long-Range Plan

On November 21, PVA submitted comments on the 2024 to 2028 long-range research plan for the National Institute for Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR). NIDILRR had sought input from interested stakeholders prior to development of the new plan. PVA encouraged NIDILRR to continue its work from the 2018 to 2023 period that focused on health care; employment and financial well-being; and community living and participation among people with disabilities. However, PVA urged the agency to amplify its research by examining labor force participation of veterans with significant disabilities and to explore the engagement of veterans with disabilities among a range of federal benefit programs.

House Ways and Means Committee Facing New Leadership

With control of the House shifting to the Republicans in 2023, numerous changes are underway among Committees that handle issues of significance to people with disabilities. Of particular interest is the House Ways and Means Committee which oversees Social Security retirement and disability programs and policies. Rep. Kevin Brady (R-TX), the Ranking Member on the Committee, is retiring at the end of 2022 and three people have expressed interest in taking the Chair. One is Rep. Adrian Smith (R-NE) who sits on the Committee and is particularly focused on trade issues affecting rural communities. With regard to Social Security and its financing challenges, Smith has pointed to a proposal offered by Rep. Tom Cole (R-OK) for a bipartisan, bicameral commission that would offer up a slate of changes to shore up the system. Rep. Vern Buchanan (R-FL) is seen as the leading candidate for chairman in that he has the most seniority on the Committee and has served on five of its six subcommittees. Buchanan too favors setting up a special commission to devise solutions to Medicare's and Social Security's long-term financing challenges. Rep. Jason Smith (R-MO), the third candidate for chairman currently sits on the Budget Committee. He has not offered any specifics about his plans for Social Security.



HEARINGS & COMMITTEE ACTION

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.

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