

**STATEMENT OF HEATHER ANSLEY**  
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**PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA**  
**BEFORE THE**  
**HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE MODERNIZATION OF CONGRESS**  
**ON “MAKING THE HOUSE MORE ACCESSIBLE TO THE DISABILITY**  
**COMMUNITY”**  
**MAY 27, 2021**

Chair Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, and members of the Select Committee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding our views on ways to improve disability access to the facilities and activities of the House of Representatives. PVA is a congressionally chartered veterans service organization whose members are all veterans of the armed forces who have acquired a spinal cord injury or disorder (SCI/D). As a result, the overwhelming majority of our members use assistive devices for mobility, including wheelchairs, scooters, and canes. Although there have been improvements in physical access to House office buildings in recent years, barriers persist. PVA’s testimony will address not only the experiences of those who use assistive devices for mobility but also those of other populations within the disability community. In addition to relaying those experiences, PVA’s testimony will provide suggested solutions for improving access to the House’s facilities and activities.

At the beginning of March 2020, PVA held its annual Advocacy/Legislation Seminar which brings to Washington, D.C. members from PVA’s 33 chapters that serve veterans, their families, and their caregivers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. As part of the Seminar, PVA’s members travel to Capitol Hill to visit with their members of Congress to share PVA’s public policy priorities. This was the last opportunity that our members had to travel to Washington, D.C. to meet with their legislators prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Having the opportunity to participate in visits with members of Congress, testify before congressional committees and roundtables, and attend hearings and briefings whether in person or on Capitol Hill is an important part of our democracy. For veterans, including those who have incurred disabilities as a result of their service to our nation in the protection of our freedoms, ensuring that disability is not a barrier to participating in their government is an important duty of Congress. This is equally true for all people with disabilities. Without proper access to their legislators, policies will not effectively reflect the needs and perspectives of people with disabilities.

The Congressional Accountability Act of 1995 (Public Law 104-1) applied the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other civil rights and workplace laws to Congress. Early on, PVA worked with the newly established Office of Compliance (now known as the Office of Congressional Workplace Rights) to ensure the Capitol Hill Complex met ADA

requirements. Specifically, we were asked to assist in identifying barriers for the Office to include in its annual report to Congress. At times, the Office would coordinate with the Architect of the Capitol and the Office of Accessibility.

Coming to Capitol Hill for a congressional visit, hearing, or other event can present barriers for people with disabilities. These barriers start at the curb. For people who use wheelchairs or other mobility devices, taxis and rideshare vehicles may not be accessible. As a result, many wheelchair users drive to Capitol Hill. It can be difficult, however, to locate accessible parking in close proximity to the Capitol Complex. Providing accessible parking options would make it easier for wheelchair and scooter users to visit the Complex, including House office buildings. For those who arrive as passengers in lift equipped transportation or standard transportation but must transfer into a wheelchair on arrival, it can be difficult to locate a safe location to deploy a ramp or make a transfer. Providing a designated drop off or pick up zone near any accessible entrances would help to mitigate this barrier and also help people with disabilities to more easily identify the accessible building entrances and paths of travel.

Upon arriving at a House office building, the next barrier for many people with disabilities is going through security. Prior to the pandemic, the security process for wheelchair users was inconsistent. At times, wheelchair users would be passed through without any screening, screened with a security wand since the walkthrough metal detectors are not accessible, or subjected to an invasive pat down. To remove this barrier, consistent security procedures for people with disabilities must be developed and screening officers must be trained on proper processes to ensure that visitors receive a fair screening that meets the security needs of Capitol Hill.

PVA regularly works with other members of the disability community as part of our advocacy work. One disability advocacy group representing autistic people reported that officers often appear to have little or no knowledge about non-apparent disabilities. For example, participants in that group's training program have been harassed because a supporter of a different gender accompanied the person with a disability to the restroom. The group also stated that they are always vigilant about how things like stimming (repetitive behavior), sensory overload, or not being able to speak and respond to questions quickly will appear to officers. Ensuring that officers receive training on the needs of people with different types of disabilities, both apparent and non-apparent, will decrease anxiety about the security experience and end disparate treatment of people with disabilities.

Once through security, navigating a House office building can be difficult due to the lack of signage to guide people with disabilities. For example, it can be difficult for people with disabilities to know which routes are accessible for those who use assistive devices for mobility. Improved signage that clearly identifies the accessible path of travel for people who use wheelchairs, scooters, and other mobility devices would help them be able to more easily locate offices, committee rooms, and cafeterias.

Another accessibility issue can be navigating the tunnels between House office buildings. For example, the Longworth House Office Building accessible entrance (located on Independence Ave) is convenient for accessing both that building and the Rayburn House Office Building. However, it is difficult to travel from Longworth to Rayburn using the tunnels as the elevator bank directly inside the Independence Ave entrance only has one elevator to take a wheelchair user to the lowest level which connects to Rayburn. The other elevators in the bank take visitors to the level that requires using an escalator to access Rayburn. Because the needed elevator is also used for freight, that can cause additional delays. It would help visitors with mobility impairments if it were easier to call the proper elevator and if signage adequately conveyed the procedure needed to access Rayburn through the tunnels.

In other parts of the House office buildings, the elevators are quite small and not fully accessible to wheelchair and scooter users. Additional signage would help to steer wheelchair users to bigger elevators that can more easily accommodate large powerchairs and their caregivers, as appropriate. When renovations are made to House office buildings, small elevators should be replaced with ones that are more accessible for mobility device users.

According to advocates for people who are blind or low vision, braille signage is falling into disrepair and needs to be maintained. This signage is needed because finding offices is very difficult for these individuals. With that in mind, offices should do more to help blind or low vision visitors to find their offices. A helpful accommodation might be for a staffer to meet a visitor in the office building's main lobby.

Another accommodation to help blind and low-vision visitors travel successfully through the various buildings might be to continue providing services like Aira (a service that connects blind and low-vision people to trained, remotely-located agents). Aira was previously provided for free to users in the various buildings on Capitol Hill. This was helpful to travel successfully from office to office. Similarly, the provision of other way finding technology would also be useful.

Once arriving at a member's office, additional barriers often make it difficult for people with mobility impairments to access their Representative. Offices on the House side are often small and do not always allow easy access for people who use wheelchairs, scooters, or walkers. Sometimes coffee tables, chairs, and other furniture have to be moved to allow entry or maneuvering within the office. In Rayburn, the double door entrances are cumbersome and require assistance from staff as both must be opened to allow access. Each congressional office should be modified to include push button access, particularly for offices located in Rayburn. One PVA member reported that because she uses a large powerchair, meetings with members of Congress and their staff often had to be in the hallway because the office could not be navigated. Thus, office layouts should also be developed with a consideration of the needs of visitors (and staff) with disabilities who use assistive devices, when feasible.

Congressional offices should also provide more information about how to access their offices and request accommodations. This information can be provided on member websites and to those who make appointments and identify as people with disabilities. When individuals identify as needing accommodations, offices should proactively move furniture and ensure entrance door access. Members and their staff should also ensure that people with disabilities are accommodated at townhalls, listening sessions, and other events, including those in the district. This may mean the office needs to secure accessible parking at those events and provide CART (Computer Aided Real-Time Transcription) services or closed captioning and ASL. Offices should develop and use checklists to ensure access for all public events. Additionally, offices should develop plans detailing how they will address accessibility needs before requests arise.

Training should also be provided to congressional staff about how to interact with people who do not use speech to communicate or who may appear to behave oddly. An organization representing autistic people relayed that staff who answer the phones sometimes hang up on callers who use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), because they think they are robocalls. Providing initial and ongoing training for staff about how to interact with constituents and advocates with disabilities will help to ensure equal access for these individuals.

Accessing the services available to the general public in House office buildings can also be difficult for people with disabilities. Restrooms are not universally accessible for people who use wheelchairs or scooters. All restrooms in House office buildings should be renovated to provide at least one wheelchair accessible stall in each bathroom. In addition, family restrooms would help those with disabilities who require assistance. For example, a PVA member expressed the difficulties she has in accessing restrooms because her caregiver is her husband. The ability to conveniently access a family restroom would make it easier for this woman veteran to visit Capitol Hill and participate in the legislative process. Water fountains also often do not meet access requirements and should be modified.

Congressional briefings and large meetings often take place in the Capitol Visitor Center. Facilities like the Capitol Visitor Center can be really loud and overwhelming for those with sensory processing issues. Quiet/sensory-free spaces are needed to help people who need to take a break and re-regulate.

An ongoing access challenge for people who are blind, low vision, or have limited dexterity is inaccessible web content, and Congress is not immune from this problem. Fortunately, many of the sites are at least partially accessible, but many still include challenges. For example, the forms required for constituents to reach out or make an appointment with a congressional office are often difficult to use with a screen reader. Additionally, there is a lot of variety in the formatting of sites. More consistency would be helpful for those who use screen readers to know where to find desired information.

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the way that constituents and advocates interact with legislators and their staff on Capitol Hill. In-person meetings,

hearings, roundtables, and briefings transformed to virtual events. The ability to participate virtually in these events expanded the ability of people with disabilities to more easily participate. For many people with disabilities, including PVA members, air travel is extremely difficult due to the lack of safe and effective assistance, frequent damage to assistive devices, and inaccessible aircraft. Thus, the ability to travel on short notice to Washington, D.C. can be quite difficult since air travel is not always accessible. Travel can also be cost prohibitive.

As the nation emerges from the pandemic, PVA believes that continued avenues for virtual participation in events is needed to ensure continued access to the legislative process for people with disabilities. Hearings, roundtables, and meetings benefit from the participation of people with disabilities. Due to travel, physical, and monetary barriers, virtual participation is sometimes the only way to ensure their full participation. We must not go back to requiring in-person access for these events.

Although virtual events can help to overcome some accessibility barriers, they can also present new access challenges. These challenges include the need to ensure that online platforms are accessible for those who use screen readers and who need communication-related accommodations. To ensure that these events are accessible to participants, offices should use checklists and follow best practices developed by the disability community.

PVA would once again like to thank the Select Committee for the opportunity to submit our views on improving access to the House of Representatives for people with disabilities. We look forward to working with the Committee and would be happy to answer any questions.

## **Information Required by Rule XI 2(g) of the House of Representatives**

Pursuant to Rule XI 2(g) of the House of Representatives, the following information is provided regarding federal grants and contracts.

### ***Fiscal Year 2021***

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$455,700.

### ***Fiscal Year 2020***

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$253,337.

### ***Fiscal Year 2019***

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$193,247.

## **Disclosure of Foreign Payments**

Paralyzed Veterans of America is largely supported by donations from the general public. However, in some very rare cases we receive direct donations from foreign nationals. In addition, we receive funding from corporations and foundations which in some cases are U.S. subsidiaries of non-U.S. companies.

## **Heather L. Ansley, Esq., MSW**

Heather L. Ansley is the Associate Executive Director of Government Relations at Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA). Her responsibilities include managing the organization's efforts on Capitol Hill and working with the Administration to promote legislation and policies that ensure veterans with catastrophic disabilities receive the health care and benefits that they have earned and the civil rights protections that they deserve. She also works to promote collaboration between disability organizations and veterans service organizations and currently serves as the Immediate Past Chair of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities (CCD). CCD is the largest coalition of national organizations working together to advocate for federal public policy that ensures the self-determination, independence, empowerment, integration and inclusion of children and adults with disabilities in all aspects of society. She also serves on the board of the Disability Rights Bar Association. Prior to joining PVA, Ms. Ansley served as Vice President of VetsFirst, a program of United Spinal Association, and as the Director of Policy and Advocacy for the Lutheran Services in America Disability Network. She also served as a Research Attorney for the Honorable Steve Leben with the Kansas Court of Appeals. Ms. Ansley holds a BA and MSW from the University of Missouri-Columbia and a JD from the Washburn University School of Law in Kansas.