

**STATEMENT OF COLLEEN RICHARDSON, PSY.D.
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CAREGIVER SUPPORT PROGRAM
VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION (VHA)
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
EVERYDAY HEROES: SUPPORTING THE VETERAN CAREGIVER COMMUNITY**

September 25, 2024

Good morning, Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and Members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss VA's Caregiver Support Program (CSP). I am accompanied today by Ms. Laura Duke, VHA's Chief Financial Officer. VA understands the critical role caregivers have in supporting the needs of Veterans and the importance of supporting Veteran caregivers throughout their caregiving journey. VA is proud to be a leader in caregiver support through implementation of the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) and the Program of General Caregiver Support Services (PGCSS).

The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-163) mandated the creation of PCAFC and PGCSS. PGCSS is available to caregivers of Veterans of any era as long as the Veteran is enrolled in VA health care and needs personal care services. Through PGCSS, caregivers have access to skills training, coaching, peer support, telephone support, and respite care, among other services VA provides. PGCSS is available to a broader group of Veterans and caregivers than our other program PCAFC, which has been expanded several times. PCAFC was originally designed to support Family Caregivers of Veterans or members of the Armed Forces undergoing medical discharge who incurred or aggravated a serious injury in the line of duty on or after September 11, 2001, and who met other program requirements. Section 161 of the VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-182) phased in expanded PCAFC eligibility to Family Caregivers of eligible Veterans. Accordingly, on October 1, 2020, PCAFC was expanded to eligible Veterans who incurred or aggravated a serious injury on or before May 7, 1975, and on October 1, 2022, PCAFC was expanded further to include eligible Veterans of all eras.

Through PCAFC, Family Caregivers have access to all of the supports and services available through PGCSS. Family Caregivers in PCAFC are also eligible for instruction, preparation, and training to assist in delivering personal care services to the eligible Veteran, mental health counseling, and beneficiary travel. In addition, PCAFC designated Primary Family Caregivers are eligible for respite care, a monthly stipend, access to health care coverage through the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and certain legal and financial services.

Today, through PCAFC and PGCSS, CSP is supporting more caregivers of Veterans than ever before. As of September 20, 2024, over 25,000 caregivers are receiving support through PGCSS, and over 62,570 Family Caregivers are participating in PCAFC. I appreciate this opportunity to share some of the work we have accomplished to deliver more support to more caregivers than ever before.

CSP named fiscal year (FY) 2024 “The Year of the Caregiver, The Whole Caregiver.” Throughout the year, we have focused on enhancing the delivery of clinical support to caregivers and implementing other programmatic and process improvements based on feedback we heard from caregivers, Veterans, Veterans Service Organizations, and members of Congress. I will briefly mention three areas in which we have been able to deliver exceptional results for caregivers, directly driven by the feedback we received.

First, we have seen tremendous growth with caregivers using respite care. Respite care is a critical resource for caregivers since caregivers must take care of themselves so that they can care for their Veteran. Through our Respite Champions initiative, CSP trained Respite Champions within each Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) to serve as subject matter experts in the benefits of respite, respite resources, and respite funding. Since implementing the Respite Champions initiative, the number of caregivers using respite has increased by 278% since the end of FY2022.

Additionally, we implemented a Virtual Psychotherapy Program for Caregivers (VPPC). VA can now offer virtual psychotherapy services to Family Caregivers participating in PCAFC. Through VPPC, VA is better able to address and provide the mental health counseling Family Caregivers request and deserve. CSP has activated clinical resource hubs in all 18 VISNs. As of September 6, 2024, VPPC completed over 13,916 psychotherapy visits with Family Caregivers participating in PCAFC during FY 2024.

Finally, we heard overwhelmingly from caregivers of their desire to receive Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) Training—so we made it available. VA designed a process to train caregivers in CPR. As of September 6, 2024, CPR training for caregivers has been implemented at 70 VA facilities and continues to grow. In addition, CSP collaborated with the American Red Cross to develop and publish a “Hands-Only” CPR video to train caregivers on this life-saving skill.

These are just a few of the expanded clinical supports we have been able to deliver to caregivers over the past year. Through continued outreach, we will work to ensure caregivers are aware of these services and can access them, where and when it is right for them. These accomplishments do not overshadow VA’s recognition that there is more work to be done to support of caregivers, and specifically more work to do to improve PCAFC.

As you may know, on June 9, 2022, VA announced a suspension of annual reassessments with certain exceptions. This suspension includes annual reassessments of Veterans or Service members who applied for PCAFC or who were approved to participate in PCAFC before October 1, 2020, and their Family Caregivers, collectively known as “the legacy cohort.” This suspension remains ongoing while we closely examine current PCAFC eligibility requirements and consider any changes that may be needed to ensure PCAFC is working as intended. As a result of this review and our continued deliberations, VA is now working to publish a notice of proposed rulemaking (RIN 2900-AR96) to propose amendments to the eligibility criteria, definitions, and other elements of the evaluation process for PCAFC.

This rule will mark a significant step toward further improving PCAFC and delivering a program that meets the needs of eligible Veterans of all eras and their Family Caregivers. Once the proposed rule is published, VA will share it widely and encourage the public to submit comments and feedback about any changes being proposed. We will carefully consider all feedback received to determine whether additional changes may be needed.

As the rulemaking process continues, we are committed to ensuring that Veterans and their caregivers have the care and support they deserve. We encourage Veterans and caregivers to visit our website at www.caregiver.va.gov to learn more about these programs and other ways VA supports caregivers. We also have CSP teams at every VA medical center, and information about how to contact these teams is available on the website.

Conclusion

We are committed to always earning the trust of Veterans and their caregivers and will work hard to continue the improvements we have made thus far. Your continued support is essential to providing this care for Veterans and their families. On behalf of VA and CSP, we thank you for the opportunity to be here and welcome your continued collaboration.