
501(C)(3) Veterans Non-Profit

March 20, 2024

The Honorable Jen Kiggans
Chairwoman
House Veterans' Affairs Committee
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Frank Mrvan
Ranking Member
House Veterans' Affairs Committee
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Kiggans and Ranking Member Mrvan:

On behalf of Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), I want to express our support for H.R. 7342, the Veterans Accessibility Advisory Committee Act of 2024, which directs the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to create an advisory committee on issues relating to the accessibility of VA benefits, services, and facilities for veterans and employees with mobility, hearing, visual, cognitive, or other disabilities.

Few veterans have a greater reliance on VA benefits and services than veterans with a spinal cord injury or disorder (SCI/D). Because of the complex nature of SCI/Ds, our members utilize health care services at a much higher percentage than any other veteran group. For most, it is a lifetime partnership, beginning immediately after injury or diagnosis and continuing through rehabilitation and periods of sustaining care. So, anytime there is a problem accessing VA benefits or services, it tends to adversely impact our members the most.

Over the last five decades, Congress has passed several bills to improve disability access both in the VA and in the community. These include the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 (ABA), the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). The ABA requires buildings and facilities that are built, altered, or designed after August 12, 1968, using federal funds or that federal agencies lease be accessible. The Rehabilitation Act includes protections against disability discrimination in federal agency programs. The prohibition also extends to entities that receive federal funds, federal employment, and federal electronic and information technology. The ADA provides protections from discrimination at the state and local government levels, as well as by private entities that provide public accommodations. Taken together, these laws provide protections to people with disabilities when interacting with all levels of government and many everyday accommodations like medical offices, grocery stores, and hotels.

Despite these comprehensive legal requirements, PVA members routinely face accessibility barriers when it comes to accessing care at the VA and within the community. In one VA SCI/D outpatient clinic, not all of the exam rooms are physically accessible. It also doesn't have an

accessible restroom. In another VA facility, PVA members have relayed that they must wait and check in and out in hallways because spaces designated for those tasks are too small to accommodate their wheelchairs, meaning privacy isn't possible. We've also heard of VA women's clinics that have examination rooms that are too small for veterans who use wheelchairs or lack overhead patient ceiling lifts.

PVA members also report issues with automatic doors that need servicing and are inoperable, making them far too heavy for a veteran with SCI/D to open. Several members have also complained of doorways being too narrow and causing significant damage and scrapes to their equipment and wheelchairs, which might not sound like a big deal until that veteran needs to battle with their prosthetics office to get repairs. And at several locations, veterans have encountered out of order elevators that often take days to repair. For SCI/D veterans who use wheelchairs, scooters, or other assistive devices, elevators are critical in getting to their appointments, particularly appointments within the VA that are in other departments and clinics outside the SCI/D system of care.

Veterans also encounter inaccessible medical diagnostic equipment (MDE). MDE includes equipment like medical examination tables, weight scales, dental chairs, x-ray machines, mammography equipment, and other imaging equipment. In 2017, the U.S. Access Board, published new accessibility standards for MDE. As soon as the new standards were issued, the VA proactively said they would adopt the new standards to ensure that the needs of disabled veterans were met. Since that time there has been no update from the VA on the status of implementing the MDE accessibility standards, and we have been unable to determine the extent of the department's progress.

Although VA has worked to address access barriers for disabled veterans, there is more work to do. Establishing a Veterans Accessibility Advisory Committee would help ensure the VA is meeting the needs of veterans, by allowing disabled veterans, experts, employees, and veterans service organizations to identify problems and offer solutions via a formal committee whenever the VA is "missing the mark." We believe that the ongoing existence of access barriers points to the need for more focused, collaborative efforts with the VA.

Passing this legislation would help ensure VA's facilities and programs are better prepared to welcome, accept, and care for disabled veterans and employees by beginning with accessibility at the forefront of their mind. The time is now for action and we call on Congress to pass this legislation as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Heather L. Ansley".

Heather L. Ansley, Esq., MSW
Chief Policy Officer