

**STATEMENT OF  
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA  
BEFORE THE  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS  
ON PENDING LEGISLATION  
JULY 16, 2020**

Chairwoman Luria, Ranking Member Bost, and members of the Subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit our views on pending legislation impacting the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that is before the Subcommittee. No group of veterans understand the full scope of benefits and care provided by VA better than our members—veterans who have incurred a spinal cord injury or disorder. PVA provides comment on the following bills included in today's hearing.

**H.R. 5639, the “*Chuck Osier Burial Benefits Act*”**

The “Chuck Osier Burial Benefits Act” would authorize the VA Secretary to provide urns for veterans. The urn would be provided by the federal government in lieu of a headstone or marker as in a traditional burial. The bill also allows VA to provide a commemorative plaque acknowledging veteran status. Traditional funerals are declining as Americans seek less costly options to honor their loved ones. Today, half the people in the United States opt for cremation and the 2020 National Funeral Directors Association Cremation & Burial Report<sup>1</sup> predicts the U.S. cremation rate will rise to 87 percent by 2040. A single burial plot in a local cemetery makes less sense to families who recognize the freedom and flexibility that cremation allows. PVA supports this measure which updates and expands VA's ability to aid the families of veterans and properly honor those who served our country.

**H.R. 5487, the “*Veterans Cemetery Grants Improvement Act*”**

Under current law, VA is authorized to award a maximum of \$5 million per fiscal year for the Operations and Maintenance Program grant which can be used to cover costs associated with upkeep of veterans interred in state cemeteries. This cap on spending limits VA's ability to aid cemeteries needing monetary support for these necessary functions. H.R. 5487 would increase the \$5 million cap to \$10 million, providing VA greater flexibility to award these grants to larger numbers of cemeteries. PVA supports

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nfda.org/news/in-the-news/nfda-news/id/5223/2020-cremation-burial-projects-cremation-rate-of-87-by-2040>.

this bill which helps to fulfill the nation's solemn obligation to cherish our veterans and recognize their heroic actions by ensuring they have a proper resting place.

**H.R. 5048, the “*Fairness for Local Veteran Cemeteries Act*”**

When someone visits a VA Cemetery, they expect it to be clean, headstones and markers uniformly aligned, and gravesites properly leveled with fresh green turf. PVA supports the “Fairness for Local Veteran Cemeteries Act” which would allow VA to issue grants to counties for the establishment, expansion, and improvement of veterans’ cemeteries. This will ensure our nation’s veterans’ cemeteries meet the highest possible standards.

**H.R. 5019, the “*Veterans Legal Support Act of 2019*”**

PVA supports the intent behind this measure which would allow VA to provide financial support—totaling up to \$1 million in grants per fiscal year—to law school clinical programs that provide pro bono legal services to veterans, including assistance with disability claims and foreclosures. Unfortunately, this funding must be appropriated, or it would be made available from the VA Medical Services account. Through the Independent Budget,<sup>2</sup> we recommended that \$64.4 billion be provided for VA Medical Services in FY 2021—\$8 billion more than the Administration’s budget request. Funding provided for VA Medical Services is badly needed to cover veterans’ health care and we strongly disagree with any plan to use this funding for other needs. Thus, if enacted, this grant program should receive its own designated funding.

**H.R. 697, “*To amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to pay costs relating to the transportation of certain deceased veterans to veterans’ cemeteries owned by a State or tribal organization.*”**

PVA supports H.R. 697 which would allow the VA Secretary to transport unclaimed veterans remains to specified state or tribal cemeteries in addition to national cemeteries. It also changes the definition of “covered veteran’s cemeteries” to those that have received a VA grant, and ensures that remains are transported to cemeteries that follow VA standards and requirements. These changes would allow veterans with unclaimed remains to be buried with the dignity afforded by their service and to be interred alongside others who served their nation.

**H.R. 6013, the “*Veteran Families Financial Support Act*”**

This legislation would reform the Service-Disabled Veterans' Life Insurance (S-DVI) program allowing service-connected disabled veterans to receive up to \$40,000 of insurance coverage and give veterans under the age of 45 with service-connected

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.independentbudget.org/pdf/FY22%20IB\\_Budget%20Book\\_2.14.20.pdf](http://www.independentbudget.org/pdf/FY22%20IB_Budget%20Book_2.14.20.pdf)

disabilities the ability to receive coverage through VA, even if they had been previously denied coverage by private insurance providers. Our lone concern with the measure is that it eliminates the basic premium waiver for future eligible veterans so they would be responsible for the entire cost of the insurance. Perhaps this issue could easily be overcome, and we are willing to work with the Subcommittee to examine ways to address our concerns.

**H.R. 6060, the “Veterans Burial Benefit Correction Act”**

The “Veterans Burial Benefit Correction Act” would provide equal burial benefits for veterans buried in VA grant-funded state or tribal cemeteries. Currently, only veterans buried in cemeteries under the control of VA or the National Park Service are provided with an outer burial receptacle (OBR), a grave liner to reduce the likelihood of a sunken grave and maintain the integrity of the soil around the grave, at no cost. We support this effort to ensure OBRs are provided to veterans buried in VA grant-funded state or tribal cemeteries as well.

**H.R. 7443 “The Veterans Claim Transparency Act of 2020”**

PVA strongly supports H.R. 7443 which would reestablish the 48-hour review period that was eliminated by VA in April 2020. We believe VA’s decision to discontinue the practice unjustly prejudices veterans by causing avoidable delays in the claims adjudication process. It also unnecessarily burdens the appeals infrastructure by preventing correctable errors from being resolved prior to promulgation. Contrary to VA’s assertions, the removal of the 48-hour review period will result in delays in benefit payments to veterans and additional cost to VA to adjudicate the influx of appeals. Our national service officers have used the 48-hour review period to survey a determination for our members before it was shared with the veteran to fix simple but impactful mistakes such as forgetting to include eligibility for the Automobile Grant and Adaptive Equipment, Specially Adapted Housing Grant, or Dependents Educational Assistance benefits. This review prevents the veteran from needing to file an appeal to make the correction. Therefore, we are glad to see legislative action being taken to fix this situation and stand ready to support Congress in getting this legislation passed.

PVA would once again like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit our views on the legislation being considered today. We look forward to working with the Subcommittee on this legislation and would be happy to take any questions you have for the record.

## **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 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.

### ***Fiscal Year 2018***

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$181,000.

## **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.