

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**  
**OF**  
**PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA**  
**PROVIDED TO THE**  
**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**  
**CONCERNING THE VA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM**

**February 27, 2014**

Chairman Flores, Ranking Member Takano, and members of the Subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), thanks you for the opportunity to submit our views pertaining to the VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program. PVA appreciates the fact that you are reviewing this program that is intended to help those veterans that sustained disabilities as a result of their military service that may be inhibiting their progress as they consider future employment, or work towards improving their quality of life. We support this Subcommittees concern and effort as it recommends improvements for this program that can help the men and women that have honorably served their nation and are making an effort to transition back to the civilian world.

The purpose of the VR&E program, as authorized under Chapter 31 of title 38 USC, is to provide comprehensive services to address the employment barriers of service-connected disabled veterans in an effort to achieve maximum independence in daily living, and to obtain and maintain gainful employment. Ultimately, a goal of the VR&E program is to provide services to severely disabled veterans that will help them achieve the highest quality of life possible.

Information from the recent GAO report “ VA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT, Further Performance and Workload Management Improvements Are Needed,” (GAO-14-61) highlights some issues that will require attention and continued oversight of this important VA program. PVA generally concurs with the findings of the report and we likewise support the recommendations presented in the report. The members of PVA, veterans with spinal cord injury or disorder, tend to be higher volume users of VR&E services. As such, we would like to offer a few areas that could be improved in VR&E.

## **ELIGIBILITY PERIOD**

Currently, to be eligible for VR&E a veteran must have been discharged under circumstances other than dishonorable and have a disability rating of 20 percent or more that was incurred in, or aggravated by their service. The eligibility period to receive VR&E services is within a 12-year period beginning on either: (1) the date of separation from military service, or (2) the date the veteran receives a disability rating from the VA. The veteran must be in need of vocational rehabilitation in an effort to

overcome employment barriers caused by such service-connected disability. VR&E provides for 48 months of entitlement to participate in the program. Unfortunately veterans only have twelve years from the date of the initial VA disability rating notification to utilize the program, with an exception for those with a serious employment disability. Although the eligibility period for VR&E was not a specific component of the GAO report this limiting factor could be detrimental to the success of a veteran's rehabilitation.

PVA and the other co-authors of the *The Independent Budget, Disabled American Veterans, AMVETS, and Veterans of Foreign Wars*, strongly believe that this 12-year eligibility period should be eliminated and all veterans with employment impediments should qualify for VR&E services. Many veterans are not aware of the VA's VR&E program and how it can be used by disabled veterans' to improve their lives. Often veterans learn of the VR&E services while talking to a VSO service officer or from information received from a service organization several years after their discharge. At that time they may have very few years remaining to utilize the program, or may be past the eligibility period.

After severe injuries such as traumatic brain injury (TBI) or spinal cord injury (SCI) a veteran requires years to complete rehabilitation and make the adjustment to basic activities of daily living. During this time he or she is focused on recovery and the activity of returning to work is not a top priority for the veteran. Nevertheless, the veteran's eligibility is elapsing.

Additionally, as many disabled veterans grow older, their service connected disability may impose further restrictions on the veteran, thus preventing him or her from continuing their civilian work activities. The veteran may still have the economic need and the desire to work for an additional ten or twenty years. With the 12-year time limitation, service connected disabled veterans become disqualified and not able to utilize the VR&E services later in life to maintain their active productive lifestyles.

### **REMOVE THE CAP ON INDEPENDENT LIVING**

The Independent Living (IL) Program, established by Congress in 1980 as an option within the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program to facilitate the provision of services, training, or equipment to veterans with severe disabilities. This program began as a pilot program with a limited enrollment of 500 severely disabled veterans each year. Since its beginning the program has seen periodic incremental increases in the maximum enrollment. Although the program has proven to benefit disabled veterans during their rehabilitation, existing legislation continues to limit, or cap the yearly enrollment. More than a decade of combat has produced many veterans that could benefit from assistance from the Independent Living option. Congress should remove the cap of 2,700 per year for Independent Living enrollment and vocational rehabilitation counselors should be trained and encouraged to recommend the IL program when it could benefit a veteran's rehabilitation.

## **REDUCE COUNSELOR CASELOAD**

As of March 2013, the VR&E field staff totaled 1,281, of which 890 were vocational rehabilitation counselors. The average caseload for counselors at that time was 139 veterans, a decline from 152 reported in FY 2009. We believe this caseload is excessive to achieve the results that could be realized. PVA has a vocational rehabilitation employment program that is currently located in six metropolitan areas-- Long Beach, Augusta, Boston, Minneapolis, San Antonio, and Richmond. Each office is located in a VA hospital, at the spinal cord unit to work primarily with spinal cord injured veterans and other seriously disabled veterans. Although spinal cord injured veterans are considered seriously disabled by the rehab industry standards, thus difficult to place in employment, PVA's program has had a remarkable success rate for placing disabled veterans in employment. Since the rehab profession considers a caseload of 125 for one counselor to be the maximum, PVA has strived to keep counselors' workloads below that number. This has allowed each counselor to spend more time with each veteran, explore all impairments to employment such as day care for children or transportation problems, and work to find solutions for these issues. They also develop employment contacts throughout the region that are interested in hiring veterans for full-time employment, or perhaps part-time employment. Reintroduction to employment often starts as part time, allowing the veteran to become oriented back into the workplace. This individual attention and guidance requires extra time from the counselor, time that is not available if their caseload is excessive. For this reason, we believe Congress should authorize sufficient staff and appropriate sufficient dollars to reduce the caseload.

## **INCREASED FUNDING FOR VR&E**

The number of servicemembers, including National Guard and Reservists who have recently separated, and over the next 5 years will leave active duty is an unprecedented total. Many will leave active duty with a service connected disability, while others will develop a disability related to their service after leaving active duty. Congressional funding for the VR&E program must keep pace with veterans' demand for this service. Our veterans have made a sacrifice for our nation, which is why our leaders must make a concerted effort to ensure that access to education, employment, and training opportunities are available for their transition to the civilian job market. There is a need for increased funding for additional staffing for VR&E including additional vocational rehabilitation counselors and employment coordinators. The current counselor to client ratios of approximately 139 veterans to one counselor is an unacceptable ratio. With many seriously injured service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan who will need this assistance, PVA believes the funding for VR&E should be increased.

Chairman Flores, Ranking Member Takano, and members of the Subcommittee, PVA would like to thank you for this opportunity to express our views on the VA's VR&E program. We thank you for continuing the work in this Subcommittee to ensure that veterans have the best available programs, options, and opportunities as they transition to the civilian world.

**Information Required by Rule XI 2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives**

Pursuant to Rule XI 2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the following information is provided regarding federal grants and contracts.

***Fiscal Year 2013***

National Council on Disability — Contract for Services — \$35,000.

***Fiscal Year 2012***

No federal grants or contracts received.

***Fiscal Year 2011***

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation — National Veterans Legal Services Program— \$262,787.