

**STATEMENT OF MORGAN BROWN
NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
ON PENDING LEGISLATION
FEBRUARY 6, 2020**

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and members of the Subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) would like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss 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 PVA's members—veterans who have incurred a spinal cord injury or disorder. Several of these bills will help to ensure veterans receive much needed aid and support.

PVA provides comment on the following bills included in today's hearing.

Discussion Draft, "to amend title 38, United States Code, to reduce the loan fees paid by certain veterans who have been affected by major disasters and are obtaining a new loan guaranteed, insured, or made by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes."

As written, this legislation reduces VA loan fees paid by those affected by major disasters. The bill also allows a veteran's next home loan following the disaster to be treated as an initial loan. PVA wholeheartedly supports this effort to avoid unwarranted VA loan fees, especially among those whom have lost their homes to a natural disaster.

Discussion Draft, "to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide electronic certificates of eligibility to persons who are entitled to educational assistance under certain educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs."

This pending legislation would require by August 1, 2021, anyone who is eligible for VA education benefits to be able to obtain an electronic copy of their eligibility. PVA supports this effort to update the current process and reduce the amount of time eligible students wait for their school to receive proof of eligibility status.

Discussion Draft, “to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for a requirement relating to the timing of the payment of educational assistance under the Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.”

This draft bill requires VA to make payments to schools no sooner than seven days after the first day of the quarter, semester, or term. PVA supports this effort to reduce overpayments to schools by allowing students to adjust their schedules during the add/drop period and receive their syllabi to help determine if their course load is appropriate. It will also deter predatory school practices of convincing student veterans to just attend one day of class in order for payment to be received rather than focusing on the academic success of their students. We also support the requirement for VA to disapprove a course of education unless the school agrees to waive any late fees due to payment timing.

Discussion Draft, “to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the treatment by the Department of Veterans Affairs of for-profit educational institutions converted to non-profit educational institutions.”

This draft measure directs the VA Secretary to treat for-profit schools that have converted to no-profits after January 1, 2016, as if they are for-profits for the next ten years following the change. PVA supports this effort to ensure those using VA educational benefits are protected from educational institutions who convert to non-profit status to evade certain regulatory requirements and operate in the interest of their shareholders rather than the interest of their students.

H.R. 5052, the “WAVES Act”

This legislation requires students using VA work-study to be paid the higher of the hourly wage under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, the law of the state where the work is performed, or a comparable local law. PVA supports this effort to ensure students using VA work-study programs receive fair compensation for their work.

Discussion Drafts, “to improve and expand eligibility for the “Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship Program.”

These two drafts clarify, improve, and expand the eligibility for the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM scholarship for students pursuing these degrees. We appreciate the Subcommittee’s interest in improving this program. These bills would help ensure VA education users are able to receive additional tuition to support degree completion and expand the program to cover medical and nursing residencies. We suggest that these drafts be merged into a single piece of legislation to facilitate passage.

Discussion Draft, “H. R.____, To increase the frequency of benefits under the automobile assistance program of the Department of Veterans Affairs.”

Discussion Draft, “H. R.____, To authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide or assist in providing a second vehicle adapted for operation by disabled individuals to certain eligible persons.”

VA’s Automobile Assistance Grant program was originally established in August 1946 to assist severely disabled WWII veterans with the purchase of an automobile or other conveyance. Changes were made in subsequent years to include similar veterans from other eras or allow modest increases to the grant itself, but little has been done to ensure the program, as it currently exists, is meeting the needs of disabled veterans—particularly those with catastrophic disabilities whom PVA represents. The draft bills before the Subcommittee would provide what catastrophically disabled veterans need most—financial help to ensure they can purchase and maintain safe and reliable transportation to sustain their independence and get to medical appointments.

Representative Cisneros’ draft bill would allow a second automobile grant beginning January 1, 2031, and subsequent grants in 10-year increments thereafter.

Representative Meuser’s draft legislation would provide a second automobile grant. As written, veterans who received their original grant on or after January 1, 2014, could receive a second grant once 10 years had elapsed. It is our understanding that Representative Meuser, plans to introduce a modified bill that does not include the “look-back” provision and sets October 1 of this year as the first date of eligibility for all catastrophically disabled veterans who received their first automobile grant 10 or more years ago.

PVA believes that the ideal legislation would aid veterans who used their first grant 10 or more years ago to receive a grant for a new automobile as soon as possible and allow additional grants after a requisite period has lapsed. We recommend 10-year increments because government agencies and industry standards place an average vehicle’s useful life in that timeframe. Additionally, vehicles that have been modified structurally, including modifications to accommodate the weight of veterans and their wheelchairs, can have a decreased lifespan.

Current law allows VA to provide financial assistance to eligible veterans through an automobile grant as indexed for inflation. For fiscal year 2020, the amount of the grant is \$21,488.29. This one-time award is used toward the purchase of a new or used automobile to accommodate a veteran or service member with certain disabilities that resulted from a condition incurred or aggravated during active military service.

However, on average, the cost to replace modified vehicles is more than double the value of the current auto grant and several thousand more when the vehicle is used. These substantial costs, coupled with inflation, present a financial hardship for many

disabled veterans who need to replace their primary mode of transportation once it reaches the end of its useful service life.

The cost of replacing modified vehicles purchased through the VA automobile grant program presents a financial hardship for veterans who must bear the full replacement cost once the adapted vehicle has exceeded its useful life. The divergence of a vehicle's depreciating value and the increasing cost of living only compounds this hardship.

Since vehicles do not last a person's lifetime, veterans should have the ability to purchase a vehicle, once every ten years, without having to shoulder the burden of the full cost of a vehicle themselves. Therefore, we ask Congress to establish multiple automobile grants, for veterans to use once every ten years, equaling the current grant maximum in effect at the time of vehicle replacement

Another factor to consider as you deliberate if more than one grant is warranted is a veteran's physical condition. Younger veterans who are injured may retain or be able to recover a fair degree of their strength and mobility after the injury that makes them eligible for the grant program. A car may be suitable for these veterans at this point in their lives. In time, however, their physical condition will deteriorate. A car purchased for transportation by a manual wheelchair user eventually becomes useless for the veteran who is now forced to purchase a minivan or similar transportation that can accommodate a motorized wheelchair.

Access to an adapted vehicle is essential to the mobility and health of catastrophically disabled veterans who need a reliable means of transportation to get them to and from work and their medical appointments. There is a safety aspect in the need for additional grants as well. Because of the high cost to procure replacement vehicles, many veterans retain vehicles beyond their reliability point which places them, and those around them, at risk when the vehicle they are operating is unsafe or unreliable. The thought of a catastrophically disabled veteran stranded on the side of the road in an inoperable vehicle should concern us all.

If given the chance for a second or subsequent grants, veterans might also be inclined to take advantage of some of the new assistive technologies that have recently become available like backup cameras, lane assist, and adaptive cruise control. These assistive technologies would help some veterans maintain their driving independence and make all eligible veterans and those with and around them much safer.

PVA would once again like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit our views on some of the legislation being considered today. We look forward to working with the Subcommittee on this legislation 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 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.