

**STATEMENT OF MAUREEN ELIAS
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BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
ON
"IDENTIFYING CONGRESSIONAL AND ADMINISTRATION PRIORITIES FOR THE
NEXT CONGRESS: HOW WE CAN SUPPORT OUR VETERANS THROUGH AND
AFTER COVID-19"
DECEMBER 8, 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 priorities for the 117th Congress concerning how our nation can best support our veterans, particularly those with disabilities, through the pandemic and beyond. The global pandemic has had a significant impact on employment and the overall health of the economy. We believe that Congress and the Administration will have a tremendous opportunity to improve benefits for the most severely disabled veterans to help them fully participate in the nation's economy.

Improve Automobile Allowance Grants and Access to Adaptive Equipment

Improving transportation assistance for the most severely disabled veterans is one of PVA's top legislative priorities for 2021. The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) Automobile Assistance Grant program was originally established in August 1946 to assist severely disabled World War II veterans with the purchase of an automobile or other conveyance. Changes made in subsequent years increased eligibility and allowed modest increases to the grant itself. However, little has been done to ensure the program, as it currently exists, is meeting the needs of disabled veterans. 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. Because of the high cost to procure replacement vehicles, veterans may retain vehicles beyond their reliability point, placing the veteran, and those around them, at risk when the vehicle they are operating is unsafe or unreliable.

The pandemic has shone a spotlight on the need for catastrophically disabled veterans to have access to an adapted vehicle to get them to and from health care appointments, work, school, and meet family obligations. Public transportation schedules have been dramatically reduced in some areas due in part to local restrictions implemented to address the spread of the virus. Fear of exposure to COVID-19 and the prospect of an adverse outcome should they contract it also decreases the willingness of high-risk veterans to rely upon others to assist them with transportation needs.

PVA urges the Committee to pass legislation like H.R. 5761, the Advancing Uniform Transportation Opportunities for Veterans Act or AUTO for Veterans Act, as quickly as possible. This legislation would allow eligible veterans to receive an Automobile Allowance Grant every ten years for the purchase of an adapted vehicle. We recommend 10-year increments because government agencies and industry standards place much of an average vehicle's useful life within 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. 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 bear the full replacement cost once the adapted vehicle has exceeded its useful life.

When initially injured, veterans may retain or be able to recover a fair degree of their strength and mobility during the acute restoration period after the injury that made them eligible for the grant program. A sedan may be suitable for these veterans during these periods. However, veterans may eventually be forced to purchase a minivan or similar transportation that can accommodate a motorized wheelchair as their condition deteriorates or the repetitive stress injuries resulting from pulling themselves into, and out, of vehicles (along with their wheelchairs) forces them to change automobiles. 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 lane assist or 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.

We also call on Congress to ensure that VA continues to reimburse for adaptive equipment as stated in the statute. Access to an adapted vehicle is essential to the safe mobility and health of disabled veterans. Now that VA has finalized the handbook governing Automobile Adaptive Equipment (AAE), we encourage the Subcommittee to conduct an oversight hearing on this program to ensure the changes are effectively addressing the needs of eligible veterans.

Additionally, we hope the Subcommittee will help us hold VA accountable once the new AAE directive is enacted by establishing a task force of VA and veterans service organization experts to write and review recommendations for reimbursement of AAE. This should include a process to conduct a yearly review and update of the AAE Directive. Congress should also consider directing VA to set in place some sort of mechanism to review the effectiveness of the AAE program and advise members annually of the results from the new policy guidelines.

Finally, we regularly hear from PVA members who have non-service-connected spinal cord injuries or disorders (SCI/D) regarding the need to receive assistance through VA for adaptive automobile equipment like that available to those who are service connected for their catastrophic disabilities. The Veterans Health Administration only offers these individuals nominal assistance with ingress and/or egress; thus, they bear nearly the entire cost of purchasing a vehicle and having it adapted. We urge the 117th Congress to institute a grant for veterans with non-service-connected catastrophic disabilities like SCI/D towards the purchase of adaptive equipment such as hand controls, transfer seats, or wheelchair locks to empower these veterans with the ability to transport themselves to medical appointments, employment, and activities of daily living such as grocery shopping. Most of these individuals served with great honor and distinction and it is only right that we would continue to offer them needed aid even if their life changing injury was not a direct result of their service.

Empowering Veterans to Reenter the Workforce

Just before the pandemic took hold, the economy was strong and there was a high demand for workers, including veterans, in nearly all sectors. Veteran unemployment numbers were at the lowest rate in almost two decades.¹

Unfortunately, employment rates for veterans with significant disabilities, including many PVA members, consistently lag behind those of their counterparts without disabilities. Veterans with service-connected disabilities are less likely to participate in the labor force than veterans without disabilities.²

Veterans with non-service-connected disabilities experience similar challenges; only 37 percent are employed compared to more than 75 percent of veterans without disabilities.³ In a survey, over half of disabled veteran respondents were concerned about discrimination because of their disability during the hiring process.⁴ Despite these

¹<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/newsletter#:~:text=Additionally%2C%20the%20veteran%20unemployment%20rate,View%20the%20full%20report.>

² <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/vet.pdf>

³ <https://adata.org/factsheet/employment-data-veterans-disabilities>

⁴ <https://adata.org/factsheet/employment-data-veterans-disabilities>

barriers, we were finally seeing increased opportunities for employment and participating in the workforce among this population.⁵

Once the national pandemic took hold, the number of unemployed veterans almost tripled, with many of these jobs not expected to return.⁶ While there has been a somewhat return to normal in the employment numbers for people with disabilities, they still remain lower than the previous year.⁷ A survey PVA conducted with our members this summer showed that the pandemic has caused employment-related losses for them, their families, and caregivers.

For some veterans with disabilities, an immediate return to work is necessary. PVA is concerned that those who were previously facing challenges in the employment landscape are seeing these challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and current economic recession.

Getting veterans back to work will require a shift in focus and more targeted allocation of resources focused on populations who need the most support to get them into jobs that are in demand. The COVID-19 pandemic has helped change the narrative around work-from-home and the productivity of employees. PVA's employment program, Paving Access for Veterans' Employment (PAVE) has seen an increase in employers' willingness to hire individuals for full-time work-from-home positions. In the long run, this development will prove to be beneficial for all individuals with disabilities.

In recent months, PAVE has seen an increase in demand for services. We currently have over 820 veterans, spouses, and caregivers in our program among seven direct service staff. This represents not only an increase in new clients, but also a shift in clients who lost employment through permanent job loss, furlough, or reduction in hours. Over 65 percent of the veterans we are currently working with have a service-connected rating of 60 percent or higher, meaning they fall into an employment category that is challenging. Roughly half are over the age of 50, which presents additional challenges.

There are additional employment barriers for veterans including age, gender, race, and geography. While there are several federal government programs that provide support to the larger veteran community, many of these programs focus their resources on

⁵ <https://kesslerfoundation.org/press-release/ntide-february-2020-jobs-report-third-month-job-gains-americans-disabilities>

⁶ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/latest-numbers>; <https://www.brookings.edu/bpea-articles/covid-19-is-also-a-reallocation-shock/>

⁷ <https://researchondisability.org/home/ntide/ntide-news-item/2020/07/02/ntide-june-2020-jobs-report-numbers-up-but-covid-spikes-may-impact-economic-recovery>

transitioning service members and post-9/11 veterans. This often mean veterans with disabilities, older veterans, and those in remote areas, who continue to face significant employment challenges, including high unemployment and underemployment, are left behind. PVA believes existing federal programs must expand their focus to include those with significant or catastrophic disabilities, non-service-connected disabled veterans, older veterans, minority veterans, and those in rural communities.

Getting veterans back to work following the pandemic will also take more than a one size fits all solution. Public private partnerships, nontraditional solutions, and legislation aimed at rapidly retraining veterans into in demand jobs will play a large part in efforts to get veterans back into the labor market. Congress could help build stronger public private partnerships to increase the number of paid training and internship programs, apprenticeship programs, and guided employment programs to assist veterans with disabilities in exploring new career fields. Grants for programs to third party organizations that specialize in transition and employment services for disabled veterans are desperately needed. No one entity can meet the needs of all disabled veterans. We need to think beyond what we have traditionally done for veterans seeking employment and adopt innovative ways to address the high unemployment rates for veterans with disabilities, whether service connected or non-service connected.

Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service

The Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL VETS) has an important role to play in helping veterans, including those with barriers to employment, return to work. At the direction of Congress, DOL VETS implemented the HIRE Vets Medallion Program, which recognizes employers who hire veterans. However, none of the program criteria focus on the number of veterans with disabilities, especially veterans with catastrophic disability. We continue to strongly encourage that DOL VETS lead the way by encouraging and recognizing employers who strive to be inclusive.

PVA also recommends that DOL VETS continue to focus on the broader veteran population by developing more paid training and apprenticeship programs for veterans who have already entered the workforce, significantly disabled veterans, non-service-connected disabled veterans, and those in remote areas.

Additionally, PVA recommends swift implementation of the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program within DOL VETS that Congress approved last year (Public Law No: 116-93). The crux of this program is to help monitor and highlight the employment struggles and job opportunities for veterans with disabilities, both service connected and non-service

connected, and to coordinate and promote federal data, research, and services aimed at addressing this ongoing challenge. We believe that this office is essential to the employment success of disabled veterans.

Increase the Number of Work-From-Home Employment Opportunities

By pursuing education, training, or civic engagement, veterans will be better-equipped to re-enter the workforce when the pandemic subsides or when they are presented with work-from-home employment opportunities. Thus, access to programs like the Rapid Retraining Program included in H.R. 7111, the Veterans Economic Recovery Act of 2020, or more funding for the Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) are essential to strengthen existing retraining job opportunities and establish new resources to get veterans employed and back on their feet. The benefits of getting veterans back to work are more than just seeing an improvement in their financial, physical, and mental health. Getting veterans back to work will also keep the economy moving forward.

VA's Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program has successfully assisted many service-connected veterans in pursuing employment and educational opportunities. PVA remains concerned, however, about the high caseloads VR&E counselors maintain as it limits the amount of time they are able to spend with individual clients assessing their current status, their needs, their goals, and what meaningful employment is for that veteran. Many veterans also continue to experience high rates of turnover of their VR&E counselors, which can affect their long-term success in the program.

As a result, PVA would like to see a VA Office of Inspector General assessment of the VR&E program staff outlining the amount of time each counselor spends working with a veteran, rate of turnover of staff, and length of employment for veterans placed into positions through VR&E. Ensuring that there are sufficient staffing levels and a low rate of attrition is vital to the success of this program. In the meantime, PVA supports a temporary extension of the eligibility period for veterans participating in the VR&E program to account for disruptions in the employment and educational process due to COVID-19 and the accompanying economic recession.

Improve the Transition Assistance Program

The earlier transitioning service members with disabilities and veterans with disabilities are engaged in the employment process the more likely they are to re-enter the workforce with meaningful careers. PVA strongly recommends that the Department of

Defense (DOD), Department of Labor (DOL), and VA work together on a comprehensive program for service members who are processing out of the military due to a disability to educate them on their rights and opportunities. We would like to see the Transition Assistance Program amended to specifically include information on disability civil rights laws including the Americans with Disabilities Act and how they apply to not only their everyday lives, but also work opportunities. Veterans with disabilities must be made aware of, and have access to, resources that will assist them in meeting their short- and long-term employment goals. Whether a veteran considers him or herself to be a paralyzed veteran, disabled veteran, wounded warrior, or other term, it is imperative these veterans understand their civil rights as a person with a disability and the accommodations and services available to them as such. This approach must be a joint effort between DOD, DOL, and VA.

Employment can also positively factor into recovery from illness and enhancement of mental wellness, especially when compared to unemployment. Meaningful employment provides daily structure, gives a person a sense of worth, and supports social engagement.⁸ Thus, not only is it financially important to get veterans back to work, but it is also better for their overall health.

Information Technology

Finally, the Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA's) lagging IT infrastructure requires business lines to create and perform workarounds. VA's Education Services still suffers from errors made during the implementation of the Forever GI Bill. Significant disruptions in veterans' lives could have been avoided, or at least minimized, if VA had modern IT systems. As you know, this Subcommittee met in September to consider VA's request to reprogram \$250 billion in Cares Act money toward a full renovation of VBA's IT system. While tapping into COVID-related funds may be less than ideal, the prospect of this aging system failing as veterans reliance on VA increases, necessitates action. If the IT funding issue is not resolved by this Congress, it must be a top priority for the next as well as the Administration.

PVA would once again like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit our views on how our nation can support our veterans through and after COVID-19. We look forward to working on addressing each of the issues outlined in the coming year.

⁸ Modini, M., Joyce, S., Mykletun, A., Christensen, H., Bryant, R. A., Mitchell, P. B., & Harvey, S. B. (2016). The mental health benefits of employment: Results of a systematic meta-review. *Australasian psychiatry: bulletin of*

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 2021

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$455,700.

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.

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.