

*501(C)(3) Veterans Non-Profit*

**STATEMENT OF JULIE HOWELL  
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PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA  
BEFORE THE  
HOUSE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY  
ON  
PENDING LEGISLATION  
March 11, 2025**

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and members of the subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) appreciates this opportunity to share our views on some of the legislation before the subcommittee today. PVA members – veterans who have incurred a spinal cord injury or disorder (SCI/D), experience the breadth of VA care and benefits in unique ways due to their injuries and illnesses. We welcome the chance to share how some of these bills might impact our members.

**H.R. 980, the Modernizing the Veterans On-Campus Experience Act of 2025**

At the end of the last Congress, PVA testified during an oversight hearing held by this subcommittee about the effectiveness of VA's Veteran Readiness and Employment Program (VR&E). During that hearing, we stressed the importance of modernizing the Veteran Success on Campus (VSOC) program. For example, education requirements for VSOC positions should be reduced. The current statute requires VSOC counselors to have a master's degree in vocational rehabilitation counseling. This limits the number of people who can perform in this critical role while also reducing the number of Veteran Rehabilitation Counselors (VRC) available to perform complicated casework for VR&E clients. PVA would like to thank the Chairman for listening to various stakeholders about how best to accomplish this change, which in turn led to the development of this legislation. We strongly support this bill and look forward to its passage.

**H.R. 1364, the Automotive Support Services to Improve Safe Transportation Act of 2025 (ASSIST Act)**

Many PVA members rely on VA's Automobile Adaptive Equipment (AAE) program, which allows eligible veterans to make necessary accessibility adaptations to a traditional vehicle. The Veterans Auto and

Education Improvement Act of 2022 (P.L. 117-333) allowed catastrophically disabled veterans to receive an additional automobile allowance, as well as codifying certain vehicle adaptations. The ASSIST Act will provide technical fixes to P.L. 117-333 to ensure access to the types of vehicle adaptations needed for veterans with catastrophic disabilities. PVA is a strong supporter of this legislation and urges its swift passage.

#### **H.R. 1423, the Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act of 2025**

PVA supports the Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act of 2025. Today, serving in the military looks a lot different than it did 20 or 30 years ago. Our guard and reserve uniformed services are being called up to serve more frequently; however, they are often locked out of the GI Bill due to limited time on Title 10 orders. This legislation would allow those serving in the Reserve Components to count their drill time, annual training, military training schools, and state level orders towards their Post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility.

#### **H.R. 1793, To amend title 38, USC, to provide for outreach requirements for Department of Veterans Affairs training and rehabilitation programs for veterans with service-connected disabilities, and for other purposes.**

PVA supports the intent of this legislation, but recommends changes be made to the text to ensure it can be implemented as Congress intends. The general consensus is that the VR&E program is incredibly difficult to contact, even if a veteran is assigned a VRC. As the program's popularity grows, the active caseloads and administrative burdens have been increasing for VR&E counselors across the country. Ensuring staff within the Education Call Centers can answer complex questions about the VR&E program would be a great first step in assisting veterans as they search for answers to a myriad of questions. Training and additional resources would likely be needed to ensure VA's existing call centers can fill this role.

In the alternative, prior to the COVID pandemic, every Regional Office (RO) had a prompt on the 1-800 menu which allowed veterans to connect directly to VR&E staff within the RO. VA could return to this policy which would help veterans to more easily connect to their counselors.

Although the VR&E program is supposed to be more than counseling, nothing in statute says that VRCs, or the VR&E program is required to engage in outreach. To be clear, we support codifying engagement and outreach activities for the VR&E program, but we believe the language within this draft bill falls short. Over the years, the VR&E program has proactively conducted outreach to assist veterans, with much of this being done by counselors, support staff, and other VA staff familiar with the program. The narrow and prescriptive language within this draft bill would only increase the work expected by a VRC. Additionally, requiring each VRC to hold monthly meetings with school certifying officials (SCO) would further reduce the time available to spend with veteran clients. Finally, the phrase "providing counseling," limits the types of staff that could potentially hold these information

sessions. By removing the word “counseling” from the legislation, other support staff from the VR&E program could offer informational sessions to interested veterans.

Understanding the intent of this legislation, we foresee another situation that may arise in the future that should be addressed. The VR&E program, when appropriately staffed and funded with sufficient resources, would likely hold more information sessions than set out in this legislation. In the outreach requirements paragraph, we recommend removal of “each employee,” again removing the phrase “providing counseling,” and replacing “monthly” with “quarterly.” Veterans should not be receiving personal counseling in a public forum and most of the VR&E staff can answer questions on an informational call. We further believe that information sessions held for SCOs should be held by VR&E national program staff to ensure the stakeholders on the call are able to get answers from the experts. These should be virtual briefings and advertised well in advance to guarantee maximum engagement.

As it’s currently written, the section in this bill addressing informational briefings expects VRCs to hold in-person briefings for every educational institution located within the geographic area of jurisdiction for each RO, and they are only allowed to offer virtual briefings to campuses located more than 150 miles away. Meanwhile, VA’s website lists more than 3,700 approved schools and as of February 27, there are almost 183,000 active cases for approximately 1,000 VRCs. That is well outside of the recommended 1:125 ratio for counselors and clients. Veterans service organizations and VA have repeatedly expressed concern with the workload for VRCs. They already have limited time to engage with their veteran clients, so it seems unreasonable to expect them to add in person briefings for every school within a 150-mile radius. Again, because the draft specifically assigns this task to a counselor, only a VRC can provide such a briefing, even if other VR&E staff might have the bandwidth and knowledge to offer informational briefings.

PVA would be happy to work with the subcommittee to resolve each of the identified concerns so this bill can reach its full potential.

#### **H.R. 1458, the Veterans Education and Technical Skills (VETS) Opportunity Act of 2025**

The Veterans Education and Technical Skills (VETS) Opportunity Act of 2025 would change language related to independent study courses as per 38 U.S.C. § 3680A, “Disapproval of enrollment in certain courses,” by adding language that a program must “require regular and substantive interaction between students and instructors.”

PVA supports this legislation, and we believe this change would help protect veterans from predatory schools and empower the VA to disapprove programs that serve no benefit to veterans. It provides VA with additional causes for disapproval, particularly when courses are found to be nothing more than a series of videos or other delivery means without any instructor engagement. This could be particularly important for SCI/D veterans who may only be able to access schools virtually but who

deserve the same opportunities and access to quality education as veterans who can attend in person. Increased oversight would be required to ensure schools are adhering to the law.

**Discussion Draft, to modify the conditions under which the Secretary of Veterans Affairs is required to redevelop the individualized vocational rehabilitation plan for a veteran**

PVA agrees that veterans should not languish in the VR&E program, but we have concerns that the bill as written will do little to address that issue. As drafted, the language states a change in employment handicap could make rehabilitation more likely. This would open the door to additional requests for changes in the veteran's vocational rehabilitation plan. PVA would suggest that any changes in the vocational goal be based on the veteran's service-connected disability, a finding by the VRC that the initial occupational goal is no longer suitable based on the veteran's employment handicap, or changes in the labor market which make it difficult for veterans to complete the essential job functions of their employment. PVA would recommend removing "or" at the end of (2)(A)(i) and replacing it with "and" before (ii).

**Discussion Draft, the End Veteran Homelessness Act of 2025**

PVA supports the End Veteran Homelessness Act of 2025, which offers additional tools to help reduce veteran homelessness. In partnership with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the VA Supportive Housing (VASH) program offers rental assistance grants through the HUD-VASH Program. Section two of the draft bill allows for VA caseworkers to prioritize case management for vulnerable homeless veterans, including those who have disabilities like chronic mental illness, chronic substance use disorder, or chronic physical disabilities. It also allows a veteran who is experiencing homelessness to receive a voucher if they do not require case management. Not all veterans experiencing homelessness require case management and this change will lead to increased voucher utilization in areas with excess unclaimed vouchers, helping to reduce the number of at-risk veterans, particularly those who may have been formerly incarcerated. Currently, if an incarcerated veteran is released, they must become homeless in order to receive a HUD-VASH voucher, which seems like an unnecessary risk for already at-risk veterans. Existing data suggests that this change would lead to a decrease in veteran recidivism rates.

This draft legislation would also authorize payment of administrative fees to the public housing agencies (PHA) who administer vouchers locally. This would authorize appropriations, determined by Congress, for necessary administrative fee payments to PHAs for costs associated with administering the voucher program and other costs, such as security deposits.

Finally, the bill requires the Government Accountability Office to submit a report on veterans served by the HUD-VASH program. This requirement would increase transparency of the program and the veterans served by it.

**Discussion Draft, to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide guidance to applicants for grants and comprehensive service program for homeless veterans.**

Currently, all grants available for comprehensive service programs for homeless veterans are required to be published in the Federal Register, but searching for them can be a tedious effort. PVA supports this bill which requires VA to maintain a single website that provides relevant and up to date information related to grants for stakeholders who are supporting homeless veterans. Historically, VA has provided information sessions for Grant and Per Diem recipients which helps them understand changes in the programs. This information is available on the VA website, but that site needs to be updated, modernized, and maintained to meet the needs of providers.

**Discussion Draft, the Fair Access to Co-ops for Veterans Act of 2025**

The housing market has undergone major changes in recent years and affordable housing across the country is becoming harder to find, particularly for many Post-9/11 veterans. Co-ops are increasing across the country, and they provide an important alternative to traditional single-family homes. Co-ops are often cheaper, especially in larger metropolitan areas around the country. Allowing the VA home loan to be used to purchase co-ops would help many veterans find suitable and permanent housing that meets their needs.

**H.R. 1814, to provide for limitations on the authority of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to purchase certain loans guaranteed by the Department of Veterans Affairs to avoid default.**

In the aftermath of the COVID pandemic and VA's termination of the Partial Claim Payment (PCP) program, many veterans fell behind on their mortgages and are still struggling to catch up. The VA home loan lacks protections available in other federally-backed mortgage products and thousands of these veterans have been enrolled in the Veteran Affairs Servicing Purchase (VASP) program to help them avoid foreclosure. This draft legislation would cap the amount of loans that could be approved by the VASP program in the future. While PVA is not opposed to capping the number of future homeowners able to access this program, we do have some questions about the effect of the legislation. Specifically, the legislation references 250 loans per fiscal year. Would this be 250 new loans annually or would only 250 total loans be in the program at any one time? We believe additional clarity is necessary so we can avoid jeopardizing veterans currently benefiting from the program.

**Discussion Draft, to ensure that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs repays members of the Armed Forces for certain contributions made by such members towards Post-9/11 Educational Assistance**

Many servicemembers paid into the Montgomery GI Bill by agreeing to have \$100 withheld from their pay during the first 12 months of their service. This draft legislation would authorize a student veteran using the Post-9/11 GI Bill to receive an additional \$1,200 to their final GI Bill payment as a means of repayment since they did not elect to utilize the Montgomery GI Bill. PVA supports this legislation, but we have questions about the effect of last year's Supreme Court decision in the case of *Rudisill v. McDonough*. Specifically, if student veterans receive additional education under this ruling due to the

forfeiture of their Montgomery GI Bill, would they be eligible for this repayment option? This committee should work with the VA to determine how the *Rudisill* decision may or may not impact this legislation.

PVA would once again like to thank the subcommittee for the opportunity to present our views on some of the bills being considered today. We look forward to working with you on this legislation and would be happy to take 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 2025***

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$502,000.

### ***Fiscal Year 2023***

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$479,000.

### ***Fiscal Year 2022***

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$ 437,745.

## **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.