



WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT

**Statement of
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Director, Adaptive Sports**

On

“Pushing Forward: Review of VA’s Adaptive Programs for Disabled Veterans”

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS’ AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and Members of the Subcommittee – thank you for inviting Wounded Warrior Project to share its perspective on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) adaptive sports programs and how effectively these programs are serving veterans. My name is Mike Owens, and I am the Director of Adaptive Sports at Wounded Warrior Project and a United States Marine Corps veteran. In October of 2005, while on my second deployment to Iraq, I was manning the heavy gun on a 7-ton when the driver lost control as the result of an IED blast, it rolled over, and I lost my right arm above the elbow and shattered both of my legs. As an amputee who is heavily dependent on prosthetics and adaptive equipment for recreation, I bring almost 20 years of personal and professional experience on this issue.

Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) was founded to connect, serve, and empower our nation’s wounded, ill, and injured veterans, Service members, and their families and caregivers. We are fulfilling this mission by providing life-changing programs and services to more than 231,000 registered post-9/11 warriors and 57,000 of their family support members, continually engaging with those we serve, and capturing an informed assessment of the challenges this community faces. We offer more than a dozen direct service programs focused on connection, independence, and wellness in every spectrum of a warrior’s life. These programs span mental, physical, and financial domains to create a 360-degree model of care and support. This holistic approach empowers warriors to create a life worth living and helps them build resilience, coping skills, and peer connection. These interactions with warriors through our programs inform our advocacy before Congress and help guide our recommendations.

According to our 2022 Annual Warrior Survey, about one in 70 WWP warriors indicated amputation as a service-related injury (1.4%), and 3.5% indicated they have a prosthesis. Among those with a prosthesis, 23.1% are amputees, like myself, as a result of post-9/11 military

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service.¹ Our organization provides several impactful programs and services for these warriors, including our Physical Health & Wellness and Mental Health programs. At WWP, we understand the connection between physical and mental health and its significant impact on quality of life. But the positive impact of adaptive sports programs is not limited to amputees. Our warrior population includes those who have been diagnosed with traumatic brain injury (TBI) (36.5%), spinal cord injuries (16.4%), and blindness or vision impairment (5.2%), all of which are veteran populations for whom adaptive sports and recreation can make a significant positive impact, and our programs are capable of serving the unique needs of all of these warriors.

Wounded Warrior Project adaptive sports programs empower warriors to unleash their highest potential by participating in modified athletic opportunities designed for their individual abilities.² Through single-day and multi-day clinics, warriors learn to use adaptive sports equipment and develop athletic skills. Additionally, warriors are introduced to seasoned adaptive sports athletes and connected with local resources. This lays the groundwork for them to continue improving their physical fitness while connecting with other veterans and their community through sport. Our Physical Health & Wellness team have seen improvements in psychological wellbeing, mobility, sleep, and social connections among our warriors along with decreases in the use of prescription drugs and symptoms of depression from participation in adaptive sports and recreation.

An amazing example of this is our Soldier Ride program. Soldier Ride is a unique, multi-day riding event that helps warriors build their confidence and strength through shared physical activities and bonds of service in a supportive environment. The program incorporates skill-building practices that accommodate all ability levels. Warriors never ride alone; they move forward together, as a unit, just as they did during their military service. With roots in road cycling, Soldier Ride has expanded to incorporate a variety of ride options to serve warriors. These include traditional and adaptive road biking, mountain biking, skiing, snowboarding, virtual events, training challenges, as well as skills development camps. We can accommodate all injuries and believe anyone can cycle, and we offer the use of various hand cycles, recumbent trikes, road bikes, and hybrid bicycles. Soldier Ride empowers warriors to find solace, healing, and strength through movement. The experience opens doors to new opportunities and knowledge and helps to unleash their untapped potential. After participating in a Soldier Ride event, 92 percent of our warriors reported feeling more confident in themselves and 99 percent agreed that Soldier Ride helped them connect to other veterans.

In addition to promoting mental and physical health, adaptive sports programs and events also support financial wellness. By restoring confidence and proving what is still possible, many veterans are empowered to pursue new careers, re-enter the workforce, or engage in meaningful volunteer work. Feeling capable and included again on the field, in the workplace, and in their communities, helps veterans regain a sense of identity and wholeness. This comprehensive sense

¹ WWP 2022 Annual Warrior Survey, <https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/media/ylwhpx4h/wwp-2022-annual-warrior-survey-full-report.pdf>

² Wounded Warrior Project, *Adaptive Sports Program Overview*, <https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/adaptive-sports>

of well-being helps reduce dependence on crisis services and instead encourages long-term goal setting, productivity, and stability.

Most importantly, this holistic health approach connecting physical activity, mental well-being, peer support, and purpose also plays a critical role in suicide prevention and further underscores the value of building a comprehensive, lifelong care network for all veterans, not just those with visible wounds.

We also recognize and appreciate the work VA has done to promote and enable veterans to participate in adaptive sports programs. VA demonstrates its commitment to improving the health and well-being of our nation's disabled veterans by providing high-quality care and support to this population every day. There are certain areas of improvement that can further strengthen VA's work as it relates to adaptive sports and increase the positive impact it can have on the lives of our warriors. To that end, we recommend that Congress and VA take several key actions to expand access, promote participation, and better enable those providing adaptive sports programs to serve veterans.

1. ***Improve Funding for the VA Adaptive Sports Grant Program:*** This grant funding is crucial to enabling community organizations who provide adaptive sports opportunities to serve veterans everywhere.
 - a. ***Offset Updated Equine Therapy Spending Requirements:*** Ensure that the recent increase in mandatory grant money for equine therapy does not detract from all other adaptive sports opportunities funded by this grant.
 - b. ***Increase Administrative Cost Allowance:*** Increase the percentage of grant money that can be applied to administrative expenses by grantees when providing adaptive sports programming.
2. ***Improve VA Staffing and Funding for Adaptive Sports:*** Ensure VA can connect veterans with adaptive sports programs regardless of where they live or the nature of their disability, including accommodating all veterans who wish to attend national VA adaptive sports events.
 - a. ***Expand Access to Recreational Therapists:*** Ensure veterans have access to recreational therapists regardless of the nature of their disability and that those therapists can connect veterans to adaptive programs that meet their needs.
 - b. ***Formalize Adaptive Sports Coordinator Position:*** Establish formalized outpatient Adaptive Sports Coordinator positions, system-wide, capable of serving veterans with all ranges of disabilities and connecting them to adaptive sports at national VA events and recreational opportunities in their local communities. These coordinators are needed to prescribe and fit specialized adaptive sports equipment.
 - c. ***Create VA Military Outdoor Recreation Liaison Position:*** Establish the senior-level position defined in section 222 of the *EXPLORE Act* (P.L. 118-234). This leader will

administer programming and provide oversight into the utilization of and access to public lands by veterans for mental and physical fitness. Veterans should have access to new and unique opportunities for engagement in adaptive adventure sports and outdoor recreational activities.

3. ***Improve Access Standards for Adaptive Sports Programs and Equipment:*** Ensure that all veterans have appropriate access to both programs and equipment that allow them to participate in adaptive programs regardless of skill level or specific disability.
 - a. ***Improve Access to Adaptive Equipment for Recreation and Competition:*** Ensure VA has experts available capable of prescribing and procuring the adaptive equipment veterans need to remain physically active and participate at their chosen level, whether that be recreating with their family or competing at the highest level.
 - b. ***Support Eligibility Expansion for Warrior Games:*** Support legislation allowing qualified veterans to participate in Warrior Games more than one year after separation.
 - c. ***Sustain Funding Levels of the Athlete Stipend Program:*** Ensure funding levels for the VA Athlete Stipend Program are sustained and adjusted to meet the needs of elite veteran athletes.

Improve Funding for the VA Adaptive Sports Grant Program

The VA Adaptive Sports Grant (ASG) Program provides grant funding to organizations who offer both veterans and Service members with disabilities adaptive sports opportunities so that they can participate within their communities. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, the ASG Program provided grant funds to 91 organizations servicing activities in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, and Puerto Rico.³ While WWP is not a grant recipient of the ASG program, we work closely with many of our community partners who are. Offering dozens of different adaptive sports opportunities, these organizations provided essential access and programming to veterans where they live, making engagement and participation much easier for the veteran. While the six national adaptive sports events that VA offers each year are fantastic opportunities for veterans to engage in adaptive sports, if they want to participate year-round, they must have access to adaptive sports programs close to home. The current authorized appropriations for the ASG Program have remained at \$16.5 million since FY21. Wounded Warrior Project recognizes that consistent participation in physical activity has tremendous positive impact on brain and mental health and we strongly encourage increasing this amount to enable more organizations, especially those serving rural and underserved communities, to receive grant funding to ensure veterans have access to programs that provide these opportunities.

³ Department of Veterans Affairs Office of National Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events, “2024 Adaptive Sports Grant Recipients List” available at: <https://department.va.gov/veteran-sports/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2024/10/FY2024-Grant-Recipient-List-Website-Update.pdf>

Offset Updated Equine Therapy Spending Requirements

Currently the ASG Program dedicates \$1.5 million, or 9 percent, of its \$16.5 million annual grant funding to equine therapy programs through ASG Program Equine Therapy Grants, and in FY24 VA awarded grants to 16 different organizations dedicated solely to equine-assisted activities and therapy. In the most recent ASG Program Equine Therapy Grant opportunity FY25 forecast released by VA⁴, the estimated total program funding has been raised to \$5 million, increasing the amount earmarked for equine-assisted therapy programs to over 30 percent of the total grant funding budget. While Wounded Warrior Project strongly supports the use of equine-assisted therapy and those organizations who provide this service, we are concerned that this increase to over 30 percent of total funding being applied only to these programs will limit grant opportunities for other community-based organizations that provide additional types of adaptive sports programming. This \$3.5 million dedicated increase could potentially result in multiple non-equestrian organizations that are currently receiving grant funding being unable to renew their grants due to lack of available funds. Moreover, while equine therapy can be delivered both in a group or individualized setting, many equestrian-assisted therapy programs operate at a 1:1 ratio or in small group settings, greatly increasing the cost per veteran served. In contrast, team-based adaptive sports programs allow greater numbers of participants and operate at a far lower cost per veteran served. Organizations that offer adaptive archery, golf, or cycling programs oftentimes have far lower equipment-related expenses and more easily allow veterans to participate closer to home.

We strongly encourage an increase in appropriations for the ASG Program to offset the increase in mandatory equine-assisted therapy spending and to ensure that other valuable adaptive sports organizations can continue to receive grants and provide services to Veterans and Service members with disabilities moving forward.

Increase Administrative Cost Allowance

When the ASG Program was originally established in FY14, grantees were authorized to apply 10 percent of grant dollars to administrative and personnel expenses related to providing adaptive sports programming, which was in line with the standard de minimis rate for modified total direct costs for federal grants. In FY16, the statute lowered this amount to 5 percent for the ASG Program, where it has remained since.⁵ As a result of this sustained reduction, nonprofit grantees oftentimes must use donor dollars to cover additional administrative costs, such as reimbursement of mileage driven by an adaptive golf instructor to provide instruction at a clinic. Wounded Warrior Project recommends aligning the administrative expense cap to the standard de minimis rate of 15 percent to allow these organizations to provide more comprehensive and impactful programming, and to offset the general increase in costs for goods and services these organizations have had to endure while continuing to provide adaptive sports services. This would also be in line with other federal grants which had the de minimis rate increased to 15 percent in October of 2024.

⁴ Department of Veterans Affairs, “Grants for Adaptive Sports Programs for Disabled Veterans and Disabled Members of the Armed Forces (Equine Assisted Therapy),” Grants.gov, August 16, 2024, available at: <https://www.grants.gov/search-results-detail/356106>

⁵ 38 U.S.C. §521A

Improve VA Staffing and Funding for Adaptive Sports

Each year the VA Office of National Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events (NVSP&SE) coordinates six national events – in partnership with veteran service organizations – dedicated to providing veterans with opportunities for healing through adaptive sports and therapeutic art programs:

- **National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic**
 - a. Veterans Participants: Over 400
 - b. Activities: Alpine and Nordic skiing, and other winter sports.
- **National Veterans Creative Arts Festival**
 - a. Veteran Participants: Over 5000 contribute, over 150 attend in person
 - b. Activities: Visual art, creative writing, dance, drama, and music.
- **National Veterans Golden Age Games**
 - a. Veteran Participants: Over 1000
 - b. Activities: Track, swimming, golf, horseshoes, and other sports adapted for older adults.
- **National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic – WWP Presenting Sponsor**
 - a. Veterans Participants: 150 newly injured veterans
 - b. Activities: Surfing, sailing, kayaking, adaptive cycling, and CrossFit.
- **National Veterans Wheelchair Games**
 - a. Veterans Participants: Over 500
 - b. Activities: More than 20 competitive wheelchair sports.
- **National Disabled Veterans Golf Clinic**
 - a. Veterans Participants: Over 300
 - b. Activities: Adaptive golf and introduction to other adaptive sports.

WWP is the presenting sponsor of The National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic (NVSSC), and we are honored to work with VA each year to support veterans on their journey to fitness and rehabilitation through sports. Outcomes collected by scientific research have proven that participation in the NVSSC significantly improves social functioning, and decreases risk of depression, anxiety, and PTSD. A 2023 study of NVSSC participants on the effectiveness of the Summer Sports Clinic for veterans with PTSD concluded that “veterans with and without PTSD benefited from participation in the NVSSC.”⁶ The additional national programs provide amazing opportunities for veterans to come together and compete in the spirit of camaraderie and shared recovery alongside their brothers and sisters in arms. However, VA has reported that demand for these events now exceeds pre-COVID 19 levels, and events such as the National Veterans Golden Age Games reach maximum capacity within days of registration being opened. This,

⁶ Walter KH, Otis NP, Hose MK, Ober KM and Glassman LH (2023) The effectiveness of the National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic for veterans with probable posttraumatic stress disorder. *Front. Psychol.* 14:1207633. Doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1207633.

<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1207633/full>

combined with the fact that VA has only \$1.25 million to invest per event, in stark contrast to the approximately \$5 million that the Department of Defense (DoD) invests annually in the Warrior Games alone, shows that the current funding dedicated to these national events is not presently meeting the demand. VA estimates that they could accommodate a 30% increase in participation should these events be better funded.

Further, at the conclusion of these events, veterans often return to their communities and are unable to locate similar adaptive sports opportunities that they can participate in closer to home. Wounded Warrior Project believes these veterans should be provided with local opportunities that meet their needs and have access to a specialist who is part of, or can advise, both the veteran and their treatment team on adaptive sports and recreation opportunities in their community. This is critical to sustain the momentum achieved at the national VA events. We also strongly believe that adaptive sports programs cannot be episodic in nature. We must continue to offer local and accessible options to these veterans to prevent a potential return to isolation or depression, ensuring we do not risk losing the spark of motivation created by their participation in national VA programs.

Expand Access to Recreational Therapists

VA recreational therapists are important members of many veteran's care teams, especially those veterans with amputations, vision impairment, or spinal cord injuries. These recreational therapists work to ensure that the veteran stays both physically and mentally engaged and provide the veteran with a better quality of life through their work, oftentimes incorporating exercise and adaptive sports as part of their treatment plan. Current VA staffing practices at SCI/D hub locations include two recreational therapists, and one recreational therapist is on staff at VA blind rehabilitation centers. However, VA does not require that a recreational therapist who specializes in amputee care be on staff, and oftentimes the recreational therapists who specialize in SCI/D or blind veteran care are unable to accommodate the needs of a veteran amputee. Furthermore, we would encourage VA to designate the 0638 Recreation/Creative Arts Therapy Series position as exempted from any potential reduction in force or hiring freeze.

Formalize Adaptive Sports Coordinator Position

Because adaptive sports are only a small part of what a VA recreational therapist provides, we recommend the formal creation of an outpatient position at VA uniquely dedicated to helping veterans with all types of disabilities find and participate in both adaptive sports programs as well as outdoor recreational opportunities to promote both physical and mental health. These Adaptive Sports Coordinators would be tasked with providing options both nationally and locally for veterans of all skill and experience levels. They should also be capable of helping any veteran regardless of their disability and providing substantive input should a veteran request specialized adaptive equipment to participate. Currently VA has seven regional amputation centers and 18 polytrauma amputation network sites. Each of these sites has dedicated and capable staff able to provide expert care to veterans every day, but of these 25 care locations, only two, San Antonio and Chicago, have dedicated Adaptive Sports Coordinators. Additionally, physical and recreational therapists in the Boston, New York City, and Miami VA

systems, where passionate front-line providers serve as ad-hoc Adaptive Sports Coordinators in the recreational therapy, prosthetics, and spinal cord injury departments, respectively, work with local partners to find opportunities for veterans to participate in adaptive sports competitions and clinics in a controlled and supportive environment. Wounded Warrior Project sees value in this type of forward thinking and proactive action and the holistic healing that is offered to the veteran when utilizing VA care, and we feel this could prove valuable throughout the entire VA system. Specialized staff doing this work as a primary duty as opposed to collateral duties will exponentially expand the number of veterans served as demonstrated in San Antonio and Chicago.

Furthermore, a full-time clinical coordinator for adaptive sports can provide both effective outreach and direct clinical care. With these experts on staff, veterans will receive clinical evaluations and expert fitting for equipment needed to participate in sports with amputations, spinal cord injury or other physical disabilities like TBI. Clinical coordinators for adaptive sports at major medical centers, like the Regional Amputation Centers in VA, could support veterans throughout their region including those veterans living in rural areas. They can also engage veterans in VA's national adaptive sports events. Finally, clinical coordinators in adaptive sports can host clinics in their communities to introduce and engage more veterans with adaptive sports regionally and service veterans with mental health challenges in addition to those with physical disabilities. This is innovative healthcare, outside the hospital walls, and in the communities where veterans live.

Create VA Military Outdoor Recreation Liaison Position

Ensuring all veterans, regardless of where they live, have equitable access to adaptive sports opportunities will require adequate oversight by VA leadership. For this reason, we recommend the creation of VA, Department of the Interior, and Department of Agriculture Military Outdoor Recreation Liaison positions be established as required by the *EXPLORE Act* (P.L. 118-234, section 222). These positions will be critical in the implementation of the forthcoming recommendations included in the report submitted by the Task Force on Outdoor Recreation for Veterans, an interagency body established by the *Veterans COMPACT Act of 2020* (P.L. 116-214, section 203) with the goal of providing outdoor recreation opportunities and access to public lands for veterans mental and physical fitness.

We believe the duties that this position would be responsible for are far too important to become collateral duty obligations for another VA, Parks Service, or Forrest Service administrative position and will play a critical role in opening up public land to more veterans. The oversight provided by these positions will ensure that public lands include more ADA-accessible trails, allowing all veterans to participate in outdoor sports and recreation. The positive impact on a veteran's physical and mental health when they can participate in outdoor recreation is invaluable to their overall quality of life.

Improve Access Standards for Adaptive Sports Programs and Equipment

While many veterans find recovery and healing through training and competition, most do not wish to compete at an elite level, but rather to participate in adaptive sports and outdoor

recreation activities simply for the opportunity to be active and surrounded by fellow warriors. Current VA practices often restrict access to the adaptive equipment the veteran needs to fully participate, forcing them to turn to non-profit organizations, or even pay out of pocket to obtain equipment. Wounded Warrior Project believes that VA should make this approval process more efficient and take into consideration the unique needs of each veteran, with a shared goal of working on how to provide exactly what the veteran needs to participate in all levels of adaptive sports and recreation activities.

For those veterans who do wish to compete at a higher level, we also recognize the positive impact of the DoD Warrior Games on those who are lucky enough to participate. Competing alongside other veterans at this level provides an amazing sense of camaraderie, but current rules only allow participation for up to one year after separation, denying that opportunity to many qualifying veterans who could benefit from the experience. Additionally, those veterans who wish to compete at the highest levels must continue to have access to the monthly training allowance that allows them to train.

Improve Access to Adaptive Equipment for Recreation and Competition

For veterans with limb loss or mobility impairments, access to adaptive sports equipment is more than a recreational benefit, it is a vital tool for recovery, connection, and long-term quality of life. Participation in physical activities like cycling, rowing, or wheelchair basketball helps veterans rebuild strength, regain independence, and reconnect with a sense of purpose. WWP has seen this firsthand through our adaptive sports programs, where veterans experience meaningful gains in physical capability, mental wellness, and self-confidence.

Unfortunately, many veterans face unnecessary barriers when trying to access this kind of equipment through VA. Under current law, VA may only provide adaptive recreational equipment if it is deemed medically necessary and tied to a formal rehabilitation program.⁷ This policy often excludes veterans who have completed structured care but still rely on adaptive sports to maintain their physical and mental health. It also creates repetitive and burdensome requirements for those who need replacement equipment, even when they've already completed training in the past.

Wounded Warrior Project supports efforts to correct this by updating VA's definition of "medical services" to include adaptive prosthetic devices and terminal equipment for sports and recreation. This change would acknowledge that recovery is not one-size-fits-all and that healing continues long after discharge from formal care. Adaptive recreation is a proven, cost-effective, and empowering part of a veteran's recovery toolkit. Veterans deserve the freedom and flexibility to pursue wellness on their own terms, and VA policy should reflect that. Additionally, having more clinical experts in the VA system, such as the proposed adaptive sports clinical coordinators, will increase access for veterans to be served by clinicians with expertise in this innovative and effective type of care. WWP strongly supports this step toward building a more responsive, veteran-centered system of care that prioritizes independence, activity, and lifelong well-being.

⁷ 38 U.S.C. §1701(6)(F)(i); 38 C.F.R. §17.3230(a)

Support Eligibility Expansion for Warrior Games

Wounded Warrior Project strongly supports broader national and international efforts to celebrate resilience and promote recovery through adaptive sports. One of the most transformative events in this space is the DoD Warrior Games which has played a vital role in helping Service members and veterans rediscover their purpose, build community, and redefine their identities following injury or illness.

The Warrior Games were established in 2010 by DoD in partnership with the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee. The first ever event held in Colorado Springs brought together approximately 200 athletes from all branches of the U.S. military. These games were created to leverage the power of sport in the recovery and rehabilitation of wounded, ill, and injured Service members and veterans. Since then, they have grown into a major annual event, drawing hundreds of participants from all across the U.S. military. Events range from archery and cycling to wheelchair basketball and swimming. For many veterans, training for and participating in the Warrior Games is a turning point, an experience that reignites confidence, motivation, and physical well-being. DoD currently dedicates approximately \$5 million annually to support the Warrior Games, underscoring the value placed on these events as part of the military's broader recovery and reintegration efforts.

We have seen firsthand how adaptive sports can restore identity, reduce isolation, and provide a pathway to wellness. That is why we enthusiastically support both DoD and warrior-athletes who participate in the Warrior Games at all levels. These experiences help veterans transition from surviving to thriving. Participation makes them physically stronger, mentally more resilient, and more connected to their peers and communities.

Wounded Warrior Project also supports legislative efforts to expand access to Warrior Games, specifically H.R. 3219, the *Gaining Meaningful Experiences from Service (GAMES) Act*, introduced by Representative Brian Mast (R-FL). This legislation would broaden eligibility by amending 10 U.S.C. §2564a to allow veterans to participate in the Warrior Games more than one year after separation. This bill reflects a growing recognition that competitive and community-based adaptive sports play a vital role in the long-term health and reintegration of our nation's wounded warriors.

Sustain Funding Levels of the Athlete Stipend Program

For a handful of veteran athletes, the opportunity to pursue a higher level of competition and represent the United States in international competitions is a real possibility. During the 2024 Paralympic Games in Paris, 16 military veterans competed for Team USA's Paralympic Team as part of 225 athletes competing for the nation.⁸ Additionally, according to the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee, over the course of the Paralympic games, U.S. veterans have earned 122 gold medals. To that end, VA, in partnership with the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee, established the VA Athlete Stipend Program within VA's NVSP&SE, as authorized by the *Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2008* (P.L. 110-389, section 703). This stipend

⁸ "Team USA Military Paralympians," United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee, 2025, <https://www.usopc.org/team-usa-military-paralympians>

provides a monthly training allowance for veterans with disabilities who are training in Paralympic sports or veterans with disabilities who are selected for or competing with the national Olympic Team. In order to participate, a veteran must be nationally or internationally classified by their respective Paralympic sport federation or selected by a national Olympic Team and meet the legal definition of a Veteran as authorized in 38 U.S.C. §101.

This stipend helps veterans pursue their goals by offsetting the high financial cost associated with training for and competing at the elite level. The monthly allowance rate for an athlete approved for monetary assistance is the same as the 38 U.S.C. Chapter 31 Vocational Readiness & Employment (VR&E) rate, which in FY24 started at \$768.42 and increases depending on the number of dependents. As established in 38 U.S.C. §322(d), annual allowance payments are limited subject to the availability of appropriations for this purpose and priority shall be given to veterans with service-connected disabilities.

WWP appreciates Congress increasing the appropriated level of the stipend program to \$2.5 million from \$2 million last year and encourages Congress to ensure funding levels do not decrease. As the cost of travel, training, and specialized equipment make competing more costly for veteran athletes, we also encourage Congress to adjust funding levels proportionality to the increase cost of competing and representing Team USA across the globe.

CONCLUSION

Consistent physical activity is critical to both the length of life as well as the quality of life for our nation's veterans. Research has repeatedly shown decreases in stress, anxiety, depression, chronic pain, and reduced reliance on prescription medication because of regular physical activity. Furthermore, positive improvements are seen in mobility, sleep quality, and psychological wellbeing. Opportunities to engage in adaptive sports for our nation's wounded warriors are not simply a nice addition, they are a critical element to enhance their quality of life.

Wounded Warrior Project thanks the House Committees on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, its distinguished members, and all who have contributed to this discussion on VA's Special Adaptive Housing, Adaptive Automobile, and Adaptive Sports Program and how effectively these programs serve all veterans across our country. WWP stands by as your partner in meeting the needs of all who served – and all those who support them. We are thankful for the invitation to provide this testimony and stand ready to assist on these issues and any others that may arise.