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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  
"PUSHING VA FORWARD: REVIEW OF VA'S ADAPTIVE PROGRAMS FOR DISABLED VETERANS"  
MAY 21, 2025**

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and members of the subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) appreciates the opportunity to testify on VA's adaptive programs, which are critical for disabled veterans, especially PVA members – veterans who have acquired a spinal cord injury or disorder (SCI/D). For almost 80 years, PVA has been a voice for thousands of veterans who experienced catastrophic injury or illness, ensuring that the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) was prepared to care for our nation's most vulnerable veterans. The VA offers health care and benefits for millions of veterans but rarely discussed are ancillary programs like the ones being examined today.

PVA's programs and departments allow our organization to collaborate in unique ways with many of the VA programs being discussed in this hearing. For example, we have a team of architects on staff who review all VA SCI/D construction projects, ensuring new facilities are fully accessible to SCI/D and other disabled veterans. We also work on VA's design guides for SCI/D health care facilities. In addition to working with VA on ensuring that building projects are barrier free for disabled veterans, our architects also work with individual disabled veterans on accessible home design.

Our Veterans Benefits Department is staffed with national service officers (NSO) around the country who are experts at complex claims work and are well versed in the intricacies of applying for programs like the Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) grant, the Automobile Allowance, the Automobile Adaptive Equipment (AAE) program, and other ancillary benefits our members rely on.

PVA's Sports and Recreation Department offers over 60 free, year-round adaptive sporting and recreational opportunities in partnership with the VA and our 33 chapters across the country. These include adaptive cycling, trapshooting, bocchia ball, bass fishing, wheelchair basketball, wheelchair rugby, and many other events that promote a healthy and active lifestyle, all while fostering community and independence. Each year, PVA partners with the VA to host the National Veterans Wheelchair Games (NVWG), the largest gathering of veteran wheelchair athletes in the country. The opportunities made available to PVA members because of adaptive sports are endless. Not only does our sports programming offer camaraderie, but it also improves the physical and mental health of thousands of veterans across the country.

### **VA's Housing Adaptation Programs**

For catastrophically ill and injured veterans, housing adaptations are critical to living a safe and independent life. Although important, an adapted home is more than just a wheelchair ramp through the front door. Without housing adaptations, veterans with SCI/D may be forced to live in homes that don't meet their needs and greatly inhibit their ability to travel within them or use the kitchen or bathroom with any level of independence.

VA's SAH grant program provides crucial funding to allow veterans with specific catastrophic disabilities to adapt their homes to allow them to live independently with their families in their communities. The SAH grant can be used to purchase, build, or remodel an existing house to an adapted home for veterans who have experienced blindness, who have experienced loss of use in their hands or a lower extremity, or who have severe burns or respiratory injuries. For fiscal year 2024, an eligible veteran can qualify for up to \$117,014 through the SAH grant. Qualified veterans can return to their SAH allowance up to six times or until the amount available has been exhausted.<sup>1</sup>

When a veteran acquires a catastrophic injury or illness, they are often experiencing a sense of tremendous loss and are navigating complex feelings like grief and depression. These veterans generally feel like they've lost their independence, yet trained SAH agents are experts at having these sensitive conversations. Historically, an SAH agent would meet with the veteran and their family, in their home to assess their needs and determine which adaptations would best serve the veteran. These face-to-face meetings are critical in ensuring that VA funds are properly applied to medically necessary adaptations and that the work needed is completed by a reputable contractor.

PVA has heard from many of our members and NSOs across the country that there are new barriers in receiving support from SAH agents. Due to recent staffing reforms, SAH agents are now expected to cover a larger catchment area, they are prohibited from travel on toll roads which increases the

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<sup>1</sup>[VA's Handbook for Design: A Guide for Specially Adapted Housing \(SAH\) and Special Housing Adaptation \(SAH\) Projects, September 2021.](#)

time it takes to travel to a veteran's home and are expected to conduct many inspections virtually. It is highly unlikely that an SAH agent is going to be able to perform a virtual home inspection with the same level of detail and understanding as an in-person inspection. This leaves a lot of room for errors and mistakes, and therefore begs the question, "Who will be responsible for subpar construction or inappropriate materials, when remote inspections are the only option?" SAH agents have learned the most effective way to deliver this benefit is with in-person home inspections that not only safeguard taxpayer dollars from misuse but provide an expert on the ground to help veterans and their families receive appropriate modifications for their homes.

Recently, PVA's National Treasurer received an email from his SAH agent informing him of his early retirement. He wanted to make sure that all the veterans he worked with knew he was leaving, and that another agent would be in touch soon, but couldn't provide a timeline for his replacement. Our members are experiencing this across the country, and we fear that without robust staffing of the SAH program, as well as administrative support to process all the necessary documents, service-connected catastrophically disabled veterans will not be able to receive the dedicated attention they need for their individual situations. In general, SAH agents are dedicated to delivering these benefits in a timely manner, but the high quality of service the program is known for may diminish if they experience continued staffing decreases.

Another critical adaptive housing program is the Home Improvements and Structural Alterations (HISA) grant. Designed to be nimbler than the SAH grant, HISA is often used to make modifications to a home such as adding a wheelchair ramp or improving bathroom accessibility. Unfortunately, this program is no longer meeting the needs of veterans because the grant amounts have not increased since 2010 despite construction and material costs rising more than 50 percent over the past 15 years. H.R. 2245, the Autonomy for Disabled Veterans Act, and H.R. 3309, the Autonomy for All Disabled Veterans Act, would raise the HISA amount to better meet the needs of veterans and tie the grant to an inflation index, enabling the grant to automatically keep up with future needs.

While PVA members and other disabled veterans rely on these home modification grants for their independence, the need for increased efficiency around the program is critical. One of our NSOs shared that a veteran can submit their VA Form 26-4555, Application in Acquiring Specially Adapted Housing or Special Home Adaptation Grant, directly to the VA, but it can take months before that veteran receives a response. Modernizing the application process for this critical benefit would improve the experience for veterans, while minimizing the administrative burden for VA staff. Veterans who are eligible for the SAH grant and are experiencing barriers and limitations in their homes must be able to access these resources in a timely manner for their health and well-being.

## **Vehicle Modifications and the Auto Grant**

Access to safe and reliable transportation is essential to the mobility, health, and independence of catastrophically disabled veterans. Improving transportation access is a top priority for PVA and we were proud to advocate for the Veterans AUTO and Education Improvement Act (P.L. 117-333). This life changing legislation authorized the VA to issue a second auto grant to an eligible veteran starting initially with veterans who received their grant more than 30 years ago.

To receive a VA auto grant, a veteran must receive a rating decision issued by the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) which establishes eligibility for the Auto Grant and Adaptive Equipment. A veteran must then complete VA Form 21-4502 (application for the Auto Grant) and submit it to VBA. Once VBA processes the 4502 and certifies it, they send it back to the veteran with an Award Letter letting the veteran know their grant has been approved, and with instructions to bring the form to the dealer where they intend to purchase a vehicle. The dealer and veteran work with the Prosthetics Department at their local VA medical center on authorized adaptive equipment, and once the vehicle is ready for delivery and a veteran accepts delivery, they sign the 4502 indicating they received the vehicle, and the dealer sends the 4502 to the local VA regional office for payment.

This process may seem reasonable for able-bodied individuals, but it is time-consuming and cumbersome for veterans with catastrophic disabilities. There is ample room for the VA to make improvements to this process and increase efficiency. For example, the VA should dedicate additional resources focused on modernization of this application process by evolving to a digital application which can be accessed remotely, allowing for e-signatures to reduce the burden placed on veterans.

We have heard several stories from PVA members and NSOs of veterans needing to wait months for approval or for VBA to issue grant payments at which point the dealership has already sold the vehicle the veteran planned to purchase. VA bureaucracy should never impede the delivery of benefits for eligible veterans, particularly for something as critical as transportation. This process becomes more complicated when a dealership has no experience in dealing with the VA or this program.

The Veterans AUTO and Education Improvement Act not only authorized an additional auto grant for eligible veterans, but it also amended the definition of “medical services” to include certain vehicle modifications (e.g., van lifts) offered through VA’s medical benefits package. Specifically, it amended the definition of “medical services” under 38 U.S.C. § 1701(6) to include the provision of medically necessary van lifts, raised doors, raised roofs, air conditioning, and wheelchair tiedowns for passenger use. The change was intended to codify VA’s existing practice of furnishing certain items, like van lifts and wheelchair tiedowns, to catastrophically disabled veterans. However, where the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has used these items as examples, the statute defines them as the only types of modifications that are permissible. Remember, this is for adaptive equipment through the VA’s

medical benefits package and is different from the Automobile Adaptive Equipment (AAE) program for eligible service-connected veterans.

Like the VA, we agree that a technical amendment to 38 U.S.C. § 1701(6) is needed to give the department greater flexibility in making the necessary modifications to veterans' vehicles to ensure they can safely enter or exit the vehicle and transport needed equipment, including power wheelchairs. The statutory language inadvertently limits the scope of an existing benefit. As a result, PVA strongly supports H.R. 1364, the Automotive Support Services to Improve Safe Transportation Act of 2025, which addresses this oversight to ensure that seriously disabled veterans are getting the equipment and modifications needed to travel safely. We urge swift passage of this legislation.

Reforms are also needed to the AAE program. The necessary adaptations approved by VA through the AAE program are in some cases adaptations that the veteran pays for directly and is then reimbursed by VBA. Some medically necessary features of a vehicle can be things like air conditioning, automatic transmissions, power brakes, and power windows. When vehicle manufacturers stopped itemizing these features there was no way to determine what kind of reimbursement should be issued to the veteran, other than VHA Directive 2011-046 which VA Prosthetics and Sensory Aid Services (PSAS) now states has been rescinded. The cost for these types of features is now included in the base price of the vehicle. Since the items aren't itemized, veterans' ability to prove the cost to them has effectively disappeared. The applicable statute, 38 U.S.C. § 3901(2), provides in part that the term "adaptive equipment" includes, but is not limited to, power steering, power brakes, power window lifts, power seats," and (A) air-conditioning equipment when such equipment is necessary to the health and safety of the veteran and to the safety of others."<sup>2</sup>

In July 2024, VA issued a final rule titled, "Adaptive Equipment Allowance." This new rule effectively ignores the statutory requirement to reimburse veterans for these items. VA's new form 10-1394, Application for Adaptive Equipment, does not list items like power windows, brakes, and other statutorily listed items. Also, the new AAE reimbursement schedule lists these items with a reimbursement rate of \$0. So, although the new regulation says VA will pay for this equipment, VA is making it impossible for veterans to be reimbursed by implementing significant roadblocks to this statutory benefit. Even prior to changing the rule, VA would deny veterans reimbursement and force them to appeal denials. The Board of Veterans' Appeals has reversed these denials. It is inefficient and a waste of taxpayer dollars to deny veterans' statutorily earned benefits and require them to file appeals to receive them.

In addition, VA's PSAS now maintains that a veteran cannot trade-in a vehicle VA paid to adapt until that vehicle has been on a veteran's record for four years. PVA maintains that this interpretation is

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<sup>2</sup> [38 U.S. Code § 3901 - Definitions | U.S. Code | US Law | LII / Legal Information Institute.](#)

not based on law. PSAS has cited 38 CFR 17.158(a) to support their new "policy," but VA did not change the regulation prior to changing its policy. This interpretation is quite burdensome for catastrophically disabled veterans and has resulted in requests for equitable relief for veterans who were in the process of receiving a new vehicle when VA's interpretation changed. We believe that VA must end this new policy.

Finally, we understand that many of the businesses that adapt vehicles for use by disabled veterans are waiting on past due invoices pending with VA. We are concerned that these businesses may be unable to continue to provide services to veterans using VA benefits because of the financial burden placed on them as they wait for payment. This would cause great harm to catastrophically disabled veterans. Our goal is to make sure veterans have access to critical vehicle adaptations when needed.

### **Adaptive Sports Grant Program and Recreation Opportunities**

As previously mentioned, our signature adaptive sports event is the NVWG. This event, which PVA hosts in partnership with the VA, brings hundreds of veterans together each year fostering team building, camaraderie, and independence. For many novice wheelchair athletes, the NVWG is the first time they've flown, or stayed in a hotel, or been to such a large event since their injury or diagnosis. A separate program, the VA's Adaptive Sports Grant Program, is a well-established and meticulously administered program for organizations like PVA to offer opportunities to improve independence, well-being, and quality of life through adaptive sports.

Adaptive sports are much more than just recreation; they are a critical component of healing, rehabilitation, and community reintegration. They provide supportive opportunities for veterans to regain their confidence and independence while discovering a community that understands the complications and challenges faced by wheelchair users. Eliminating grants or reducing necessary VA staff, specifically recreational therapists, would reduce the number of opportunities for veterans and exacerbate barriers to participation and rehabilitation.

It is difficult to describe how impactful adaptive sports can be on an individual veteran's life. PVA members who participate in adaptive sport programs improve their cardiovascular health, increase their strength, stability, and endurance, all of which lead to a longer and healthier life. The benefits of accessible adaptive sports go beyond just improved physical health; they can also have a profound impact on veteran mental health. James, an Air Force veteran, told PVA, "I love adaptive sports; they saved my life. [They] got me off drugs and alcohol and my suicidal ideations stopped. When I first came in 2018, I was depressed and suicidal and didn't really want to be here. Another veteran I met schooled me, talked to me about the competition and the games, and what it's like to have like-minded people being here. I went home with three gold medals and a bronze that year." Similarly, Jason, a Marine Corps veteran, spoke of the power of adaptive sports by saying, "Living in the darkness, living with depression, keeping yourself in dark places, you eat yourself away. But being

able to push barriers, that helps people know there is more to life. Adaptive fitness can help save a life; it gives you a great sense of purpose.”

The VA’s Adaptive Sports Grant, and adaptive sports more broadly, help change the lives of disabled veterans for the better. It’s important to note that VA staff are the facilitators of these transformational programs. Occupational therapists, physical therapists, and recreational therapists work in coordination with each other and other providers to offer evidence-based treatment and rehabilitation, improve wellness and lifestyle, and ultimately improve a veteran’s quality of life. Recreational therapists are professionals who assist veterans in finding a reason to reengage with the world around them post injury or diagnosis in a holistic way. They offer individualized care that impacts a veteran’s social, cognitive, and physical health and help to bridge the gap between their clinical rehabilitation and community reintegration.

The profound impact of recreation and recreational therapists has long been debated, as demonstrated in the testimony of PVA Past President, Donald H. Broderick, before the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee in 1975. In his testimony, Past President Broderick testified that:

“Patients are left to their own devices resulting in rampant deviant behavior. Instead of scheduled recreational and cultural activities in the evening hours and on weekends, the patient is forced to seek diversionary interests for himself. For the average person this is of no consequence, but to a man who has recently suffered such an injury as to make him question the value of life, the results can be more crippling than his paralysis. Rather than have young men turn to drugs and alcohol, suffer unnecessary emotional strain, and devoid themselves of motivation and expectations needed to recover from the catastrophic disabilities of paraplegia, blindness, or multiple amputation, we can assist them. Through stimulating severely disabled patients to use their leisure time constructively, as much can be done to guarantee their rehabilitation as by providing educational or vocational training. It is a proven fact that the greatest number of failures in rehabilitating a person, occur in the evening hours and on weekends when they are away from work. It seems senseless to throw away the efforts, money, and most important, individuals’ lives, because of the failure to teach that person how to cope with his leisure time. Money and specific programs must be directed in this area, or we shall lose many valuable men to a life of failure, and ultimately, confinement in VA hospitals. You must prod the VA to take action and begin an active and effective program of recreation.”

Congress and the VA heeded these suggestions and over the years have developed robust adaptive sports and recreation programs that promote physical and mental health, which offer opportunities for collaboration and increased engagement between the VA and veteran organizations and

ultimately has had a lasting impact on the lives of thousands of individual veterans. Several PVA members who discovered adaptive sports at the VA, and who participated in the NVWG, have gone on to be Paralympians representing Team USA this past year in Paris. Marco, a Marine Corps Veteran, was a second time Paralympian, Mason competed on the USA Wheelchair Rugby team where they took the Silver Metal, and Jason competed in para-archery where he took home the Gold for Team USA.

We urge Congress to reauthorize the VA's Adaptive Sports Grant program which is set to expire at the end of the year. When it comes to federal funding having a direct impact on veterans, there are very few other opportunities, if any, that have such a positive impact on the quality of someone's life. The resources spent on these amazing programs and opportunities have a profound impact on veterans, their families, their caregivers, and their communities.

In closing, adaptive programs and benefits are essential in the life and wellbeing of PVA members. Before any of these were available to disabled veterans, it was common practice for veterans to languish in long-term care facilities or other institutional settings rather than living independent lives that allowed them to thrive. Now, disabled veterans can live meaningful lives within their communities. They can drive themselves to work, their VA appointments, or other activities in their local communities. Every one of them is a living example how support from the VA can transform the lives of catastrophically disabled veterans in a meaningful and lasting way.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our views on adaptive programs offered by the VA. We look forward to working with the subcommittee and the VA to ensure the longevity of the programs discussed at the hearing today.



**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.