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

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BEFORE THE  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY  
ON  
"BOUNCE HOUSES, DRONES, AND MASSAGE CHAIRS: A REVIEW OF VA'S PURCHASE HISTORY IN  
THE VETERAN READINESS AND EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM"**

**APRIL 16, 2026**

Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas, and members of the subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), appreciate the opportunity to share our views on the Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Program. VR&E assists disabled veterans in finding meaningful and lasting employment despite incurring disabilities and illnesses due to their military service. The services and supports available to veterans with catastrophic disabilities through VR&E are critical to ensuring their successful employment outcomes and independence.

Prior to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, there were no widespread federal protections against disability-based employment discrimination. PVA was a leader in advocating for the passage of this seminal civil rights law that provides opportunities and access for people with disabilities, including disabled veterans. While the ADA guaranteed equal opportunity in public accommodations, employment, and state and local government services, many disabled veterans still encounter challenges when attempting to participate in the labor market.

PVA has been fortunate to share our views on the VR&E program over the years and has testified several times before this subcommittee. We appreciate each of these opportunities but there still seems to be a disconnect between the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), Congress, and the veteran community about the best ways to ensure the sustainability of this important program. So, PVA would like to take this opportunity to discuss the basics of the VR&E program, highlight the importance of the Independent Living (IL) track for disabled veterans, and offer solutions for the program's future. Also, we will recommend ways to improve the experience for veterans attempting to access the program, as well as those enrolled, and discuss the relationship between PVA and the VR&E program.

### **VR&E Tracks and Purpose**

For more than a century, the VR&E program has provided vocational rehabilitation counseling and other resources that contribute to the long-term well-being of our nation's disabled veterans. The program is comprised of five tracks that offer specialized services and supports, providing veterans with the expertise of Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRCs) who help them determine suitable employment opportunities based on their long-term abilities. The five tracks are reemployment, rapid access to employment, self-employment, employment through long-term services, and independent living.

The reemployment track can assist those who have recently separated from the military and who would like to return to their old employer, when suitable. This track makes the most sense for servicemembers returning to a civilian job from an activation who need workplace accommodations due to injury or illness sustained during service, and for those under the protection of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA).

The rapid access to employment track helps veterans who wish to use their existing skills in their next job. Veterans enrolled in this track may be eligible for employment counseling, short-term training, job-search and job-placement support from VRCs or other program staff, such as a Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist (VRS).

The employment through long-term services track is designed to support veterans who are struggling to find meaningful employment due to the severity of their service-connected injury or illness. This track allows veterans to pursue education or training to obtain employment beyond their current skill set and experience. Employment through long-term services is often one of the most misunderstood tracks. Too many veterans assume that when they are eligible for VR&E, they are automatically eligible for this track and that the VA will pay for whatever education path they are interested in. However, that is not the case. VR&E is not the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

The self-employment track is intended for veterans with an employment barrier who have the desire, skills, and drive to run a successful business. While in this track, veterans may receive coordination services and assistance with a business plan, an analysis of the business concept, training in small-business operations, marketing, and finance, as well as guidance on obtaining the resources needed to carry out the business plan. This track is coordinated with the Small Business Administration, which approves business plans on behalf of the VRCs. Historically, the self-employment track has been marred with confusion, barriers to entry, and a lack of transparency.

Lastly, the IL track is designed to help disabled veterans achieve maximum independence in their daily lives. If a veteran has difficulty with activities of daily living, such as bathing, dressing, entering or exiting their home, or if a veteran is so disabled that they cannot work, they may qualify for IL services. Through the IL track, a veteran may be eligible for various home adaptation grants intended to improve the accessibility of a veteran's home and enhance a veteran's overall quality of life.

### **Independent Living and Catastrophically Disabled Veterans**

The IL track was established by Congress in 1980 as a pilot program with an initial enrollment cap of 500 veterans per fiscal year. Over time, the cap has increased, most recently to 2,700 in 2010.

The IL track focuses on providing services to veterans with severe disabilities; so, they may improve functioning with their disabling condition, allowing them to consider employment or volunteer work. Through IL, the VA can guide these veterans in developing goals and provide information, referrals to support resources, and case management, if necessary, to support their success. Several creative

alternatives to employment preparation can be recommended, purchased, or approved by a veteran's counselor to enhance a veteran's quality of life.

The IL track must be able to accept any veteran who could benefit, free from concerns about exceeding the arbitrary enrollment cap. In addition, VR&E counselors must be well-versed in the IL track to ensure that eligible individuals who would benefit most from enrollment are given the opportunity to participate. Once a veteran is in the program, VRCs must also closely track referrals to VA services and benefits to ensure they are addressed. Otherwise, the program will fail the veterans it serves, and their independence will be at risk.

### **Improving Understanding of the VR&E Program**

There is a fundamental misunderstanding of what the VR&E Program is supposed to do for veterans. You need only look up VR&E on any social media platform to see that veterans across the country do not fully understand its purpose. At its core, VR&E is an employment program for disabled veterans. The differences between tracks may seem frivolous to many people, but within each track are specific guidelines and regulations that authorize or limit what can be approved.

Most veterans believe VR&E exists to help them return to school or address needs related to starting their own business, but they often fail to understand the role of a VRC in the process. There have been many debates about the education level required for a VRC, along with proposals to reduce the education requirement for the position. It is imperative for stakeholders to understand that the expertise that comes with a master's in vocational rehabilitation directly relates to a veteran's viability and long-term employment outcomes.

It makes little sense for a veteran who is service-connected for bad knees and a bad back to be approved by a VR&E counselor for work in a labor-intensive field. The service-connected disabilities the veteran possesses will inevitably be exacerbated by this type of work, and the veteran will likely need to find another career path in the future. But what happens to those veterans when they've exhausted their education benefits and VR&E eligibility, and then find themselves needing assistance at a critical juncture in their lives? A VRC is trained to find that veteran suitable, sustainable, and

financially sufficient employment that will sustain them through their lives, not just for a handful of years after leaving the program.

### **Improve and Enhance VR&E**

For years, PVA, and other veterans service organizations (VSOs) have requested that the VR&E program receive additional appropriations from Congress to meet veterans' demand for the program. Over the past few years, VR&E program enrollment has grown exponentially with little increase in staff or resources. Now, we find ourselves in a crisis. Veterans are experiencing the longest wait times of the program's history, counselors are drowning in administrative burden, and still, we have hearings asking VSOs and the VA, "How can we fix this?" The answer is simple: there needs to be a hiring blitz for VR&E counselors and program support staff.

Another potential barrier within the program is that the decision to hire an additional counselor is determined at the Regional Office (RO) level. With limited available funds, the RO may need additional raters or other staff who they believe are more important than a VRC or other VR&E staff. Ironically, in past hearings, Congress demanded that the program's director fill positions in ROs across the country, but the director lacks that authority. After discovering significant wait times in the San Diego area, VR&E activated a Tiger Team to help get the situation under control. The team successfully got the RO back on track, proving that additional staff can subdue this crisis. The VA should prioritize hiring VRCs, VRSs, and other administrative staff that can help where the need is the greatest, working to reduce the backlog of applications, streamline approvals, and delegate administrative tasks to support staff to increase a VRC's ability to offer direct employment counseling to the most complex cases.

VR&E is intended to provide rehabilitation counseling to disabled veterans with complex disabilities and serious barriers to employment. Providing professional, intensive, and supportive counseling is now something that VRCs get penalized for. Instead, they are being asked to prioritize authorizations, reimbursements, uploads, letters, dashboards, and performance metrics. While these are important functions, they are not counseling. If these functions are now the priority of the VA, then they should

hire individuals with business, accounting, or similar backgrounds to accomplish that work. VRCs must be able to focus on what they are trained to do: care for veterans and their employment situations.

The current trajectory of the VR&E program is unsustainable. The program is experiencing a perfect storm of high case volume, understaffing, and an enormous amount of administrative burden. We have heard that morale is impossibly low. The demands of management are crushing counselors. Meanwhile, the metrics they are expected to perform are created for claims raters, not VRCs and employment outcomes. All VRCs are forced to work mandatory overtime, while also receiving emails about the importance of work-life balance.

Changes are needed to place counseling back at the center of VR&E delivery to ensure severely disabled veterans receive access to the benefits they have earned. Some recommendations to improve the program are to:

- Hire additional VRs to handle basic case management tasks such as collecting grades, submitting authorizations to schools, reviewing bills, contacting veterans for missing paperwork, conducting outreach on inactive cases, and other work that doesn't require the skills of a VRCs.
- Let master's-level VRCs determine program eligibility; administer vocational assessments and career exploration; manage plan development and redevelopment; research appropriate training programs; conduct labor market analysis; coordinate services with other departments; assess the need for accommodations; assist with job placement; and, overall, have more contact with higher-need veterans.
- Create specialty or tiger teams, composed of master's-level VRCs for more complex service tracks, such as IL and self-employment. These services differ significantly from the other tracks and require substantial manpower.
- Create a national specialty team for retroactive inductions, which typically require 10-20 hours of work per case.
- End mandatory overtime for VRCs and instead, offer it on a volunteer basis.

- Ensure the new case management system, the Readiness and Employment System (RES), is ready for full deployment. Several IT projects totaling millions of dollars have already failed to improve VR&E delivery. Thus, the VA must be more careful about this latest effort. Years of thoughtful development went into the new RES, and we must do everything we can to ensure the national rollout is a success.

The bottom line is VR&E can be improved, but it will take innovative and intentional actions to move the needle on veteran outcomes.

### **PVA and the VR&E Program**

At a subcommittee oversight hearing in 2018, our Chief Policy Officer, Heather Ansley, testified on VR&E and stressed the importance of continued collaboration with public and private partners for the program. PVA's Veteran Career Program (VCP), formerly known as PAVE, is staffed by VRCs who provide one-on-one career counseling to all veterans, transitioning service members, spouses, and caregivers. Our VCP team has long worked alongside the VR&E program; however, in recent months, something has changed within VR&E, and our VCP staff are seeing it firsthand.

For a veteran to begin the VR&E program, they must complete VA Form 20-1902w, which is used to determine eligibility and the specific employment and training needs of veterans. At the top of the form, it states that it is intended to be completed during the comprehensive initial evaluation conducted by a VRC. However, our career program staff have helped several veterans fill out this form, which is now expected to be completed by the veteran before a VRC can even schedule the initial intake call. An effective intake appointment is usually scheduled for an hour; yet, we hear from veterans that some VRCs are only offering a 20-minute phone call for these critical appointments. That is unacceptable. A veteran's service-connected disabilities might make it difficult or impossible for them to complete this form to even receive an evaluation.

Our career program staff are even helping VRCs do their jobs, especially new counselors who have not received the appropriate training. Because of the experience of many of our VCP staff, newer VRCs know they are a reliable resource to help them navigate unfamiliar systems. This becomes

especially true when discussing the complexities of the IL track, which could take several hours of administrative work just for the initial intake and approval.

We are concerned that the VR&E program is at a dangerous tipping point. We fear that counselors will choose to leave the VA, leaving the program in an even worse situation. Our career program staff feel that VA counselors are being placed in an untenable situation, resulting in veterans being denied enrollment in VR&E. Veterans may even choose to give up on a program they are eligible for because of the significant barriers to entry. The current situation cannot continue.

Congress's refusal to fund the VR&E program at an appropriate level and VA's inability to know what the needs of the program are nationally, result in veterans not receiving proper assistance. The VA must make every reasonable effort to help veterans access their benefits. The growing trend of VA relying on veterans to provide additional information to access their earned benefits is becoming alarming, when, historically, this was done in partnership with VA staff. This is especially true in the case of PVA members who are some of the most catastrophically disabled veterans the VA cares for. VRCs must be able to spend the appropriate amount of time and attention on complex cases.

During the 2018 hearing mentioned earlier, Chief Policy Officer, Heather Ansley, wrote in her testimony: "With the reality of continuing budgetary constraints, it is unclear when, if ever, VR&E may have the counselors and other resources necessary to adequately assist the increasing number of veterans who are seeking VR&E services each year." Here we are again, discussing caseloads being too high and the administrative burden being too great, yet there seems to be no measurable progress in ensuring that veterans are served by a properly resourced system.

It is our hope to continue working with this subcommittee, Congress, the VA, and other stakeholders to ensure the sustainability of the VR&E program. Thank you again for the opportunity to share our views on the VR&E program, and I welcome any questions you may have.

### **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 2026***

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events—  
Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$368,500.

#### ***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.

### **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.