

501(C)(3) Veterans Non-Profit

**STATEMENT OF JULIE HOWELL**  
**PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA**  
**BEFORE THE**  
**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS**  
**ON**  
**“EXPLORE AMERICA250: ENHANCING ACCESSIBILITY AT OUR**  
**NATIONAL PARKS AND PUBLIC LANDS”**

**APRIL 22, 2026**

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) appreciates the opportunity to testify today on behalf of our members, veterans who have incurred a spinal cord injury or disorder (SCI/D). Disability access is central to PVA’s mission, as is ensuring accessible health care and benefits delivery provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and advancing disability rights for all people with disabilities. We are grateful for the subcommittee’s continuing interest in the EXPLORE Act (PL 118-234), which strives to improve access to recreation on public lands.

**The Fight for Disability Access**

The fight for accessibility is long and storied, fraught with exploitation and avoidance, but the Federal Government made meaningful progress with the passage of the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 (ABA). Additional progress was made with the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which also established the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board, now known as the U.S. Access Board, which was tasked with ensuring federal compliance of the ABA. In 1986, we saw victory for accessibility in the skies as the Air Carrier Access Act was passed, the first law prohibiting discrimination against people with disabilities in commercial air travel.

PVA advocated for each of these advancements, along with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, which provided opportunities and access for people with disabilities, including disabled veterans. With the passage of the ADA, the Access Board was authorized to provide technical assistance and training on its guidelines, conduct research to support and maintain existing guidelines, and expand standards that apply to private and public sectors.

It is important to understand how long people have been fighting for the bare minimum in access standards. Despite the passage of many laws aimed at improving access, there are still many entities that fail to comply. PVA members and other people with disabilities looking to access outdoor spaces and federal lands still encounter accessibility barriers, which is why PVA is invested in full implementation of the EXPLORE Act. While we wait for the accessibility provisions within the EXPLORE Act to be realized, we also recognize that compliance with existing laws that increase accessibility in public lands is another area that needs attention.

Veterans have increasingly pointed to outdoor recreation as a tool for recovery and reintegration after leaving military service, noting time in nature and shared activities can help rebuild community, reduce stress, and support long-term mental health.

### **PVA Programs to Improve Access for Disabled Veterans**

PVA is proud of its work to promote the independence and wellbeing of our members through our programs. We have an in-house architecture department that is dedicated to universal design standards and wrote the book on accessible home design. Our architects regularly collaborate with the VA to ensure new infrastructure projects are fully accessible for disabled veterans and they have worked with the Kennedy Center, Gillette Stadium, and other venues, improving accessibility for everyone.

PVA's Sports and Recreation Department will offer over 60 adaptive sporting and recreational opportunities in partnership with our 33 chapters across the country this year. These include adaptive cycling, trapshooting, boccia ball, bass fishing, wheelchair basketball, wheelchair rugby, and many other events that promote a healthy and active lifestyle, 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. PVA members benefit tremendously because of our adaptive sports opportunities. Not only do our sports programs offer experiences and camaraderie, but they also improve the physical and mental health of thousands of veterans across the country.

Other PVA staff work to ensure federal compliance and enforcement of disability policy and help our members file complaints with the relevant agencies when appropriate. Some recent examples of work done by our advocacy attorneys include helping a member who experienced accessibility barriers at the MacDill Air Force Base campground. This location has over 200 camping sites but only two are accessible for a wheelchair user. Under the ABA, the campground should have a minimum of eight camping facilities with accessibility features. PVA staff worked with the member to file a complaint with the Access Board. Another PVA member filed a complaint due to accessibility barriers at the Theodore Roosevelt Island National Park, which is located nearby. The National Park Service (NPS) has a corrective action plan issued for the park; however, we have been told that it is on hold

due to the lack of funding. For federal land agencies to adhere to accessibility laws and to deliver on corrective action plans like the one mentioned, funding and resources will be essential. Our members enjoy the outdoors and when they run into accessibility barriers, they know that PVA staff will be there to advocate on their behalf.

### **PVA's Sports and Recreation Outdoor Experience**

PVA's Sports and Recreation Program aims to provide an enriching and supportive environment where participants can engage in outdoor activities and foster both physical and mental wellbeing. Last year, PVA hosted our first outdoor recreation experience in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Ten PVA members visited Grand Teton National Park and surrounding areas to experience hiking, paved path biking, and other adaptive outdoor recreation opportunities.

In February, PVA held our first winter sports opportunity in Carrabassett Valley, Maine. At this event, our members were able to engage in adaptive skiing and other winter activities under the care of trained professionals. Other outdoor recreation opportunities this year will include adaptive mountain biking, water sports, and hiking. All events planned through our outdoor recreation program are tailored for veterans living with significant disabilities who often find barriers to entry when it comes to outdoor activities.

Adaptive sports go beyond 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. 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. We have also witnessed a profound impact on veteran mental health.

### **Access for People with Disabilities**

PVA worked with committee staff in the early stages of the EXPLORE Act's development. Our members and other veterans will benefit greatly from the full implementation of this legislation, as will all people with disabilities. Confidence in outdoor spaces offers a host of benefits for all people but this is especially true for veterans living with a disability. When a disabled veteran has unfettered access to outdoor spaces, this could provide opportunities to improve their comfort with mobility devices, increase their strength or cardiovascular health, and allow for overall wellness to improve. These are lasting benefits that are hard to measure.

Reducing accessibility barriers in outdoor spaces on federal lands would have a significant impact on disabled veterans; however, enforcement is critical to ensuring the successful implementation of the EXPLORE Act. Unfortunately, citing the ABA or the Rehabilitation Act in the text of the legislation does not automatically equal accessibility. The minimum accessibility standards are already established in

law, yet uniform implementation on federal lands is often lacking. In the absence of sufficient resources and effective enforcement, full accessibility will be delayed.

Full implementation of the EXPLORE Act will require resources and staff to accomplish the lofty goals within Subtitle A, Sections 211 through Section 216. Funding for the National Park Service (NPS) has remained flat over multiple administrations according to a Congressional Research Service report published in 2024.<sup>1</sup> Yet, recent budget proposals would drastically cut funding for federal land management agencies that, if passed, would make it unlikely for them to carry out the intent of the EXPLORE Act. Congress must ensure that agencies have the funding needed to be successful and empower them to accomplish the objectives of this important legislation.

Fulfilling the expectations laid out in Sections 211 through Section 216 may also require greater leverage of technology to complete. The federal agencies required to execute massive inventories of trails and other recreation features across the country will need to rely heavily on technology when people power isn't enough. These inventories need to assess length, slope, cross-slopes, pitch, trail surfaces, width, and elevation, and capturing all that data is no small feat. Staff, resources, and technology will be critical in accomplishing the mission at hand. This isn't throwing money at a problem. There are only so many hours in a day, so we must think innovatively about how to find solutions. Some of this work is already being done, in coordination with volunteers, using technology such as the High Efficiency Trail Assessment Process (HETAP), which NPS staff and volunteers use to record trails to assess for accessibility barriers.

The EXPLORE Act requires federal agencies to inventory, assess, and improve outdoor recreation spaces, such as camping facilities, archery ranges, boat launch ramps, picnic facilities, and outdoor features, such as restrooms. Part of that assessment should include the consideration that veterans with catastrophic disabilities may require the help of a caregiver to perform certain tasks, e.g., using the restroom, which may affect the size and design of these facilities.

Veterans with disabilities face barriers before entering public lands and during their visits. Many have difficulty finding accessible parking spaces. A common issue PVA members face is the need for accessible van spaces. There needs to be sufficient space for a wheelchair ramp to lower, or for a vehicle lift to swing their chair. These larger parking spaces are rarer than a traditional accessible space, which is important to consider when attempting to improve accessibility. Because National Parks are so popular, these larger spaces can be difficult to find. Ensuring that accessible restrooms are available throughout is also important, as is making sure those restrooms are sanitary for guests. Again, we want to commend the work that NPS has done in making sure this information, such as

---

<sup>1</sup> [National Park Service \(NPS\) Appropriations: Ten Year Trends, Congressional Research Service Report, R42757, 2024.](#)

accessible parking, is available on their websites for certain parks. While not every park, accessible parking space, and trail is accounted for yet online, they have been working hard to improve the online information for people with disabilities.

One concern that has emerged when talking to federal agencies about implementing this bill is the term “wheelchair.” The narrow definition of this term in existing law may impede uniform implementation of the EXPLORE Act across federal agencies. Additionally, we have concerns with the ambiguity in the term “high priority trails.” This categorization will likely differ between agencies as will the qualifications for them, and some additional guidance would be helpful.

PVA is encouraged to see that Secretarial Order (SO) 3435, Implementation of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act, included Access Improvements in Title II as a Key Implementation Area. We are hopeful that the necessary resources will be allocated to accomplish these improvements and increase accessibility.

### **Military and Veterans in Parks**

There are many organizations that offer similar opportunities for disabled veterans. We are hopeful that Subtitle B, Military and Veterans in Parks, will increase the number of organizations that can connect veterans to the outdoors. Three themes stand out to us as critical to the success of Subtitle B: foundation and resources, partnerships and programming, and sustainability and evaluation.

For the EXPLORE Act to be successful, Congress must prioritize securing sufficient and sustained funding across the agencies impacted: the Department of Defense, the VA, the Department of Interior, and the Department of Agriculture. Ensuring interagency cooperation for the EXPLORE Act will require strong organizational leadership with clear lines of communication. Agencies will have to work together to develop accessible infrastructure, including adaptive equipment and facilities for disabled veterans. We will need effective coordination between agencies, along with comprehensive outreach and marketing to reach the military and veteran communities, which will be essential for program implementation.

Partnerships and programming will also be critical for success. Meaningful collaboration with legitimate veterans’ organizations, private outdoor recreation companies, and state and local governments will be needed to create programs that respect military culture and values. Programming must include professional staff trained with cultural competency, peer-to-peer veteran support systems, and adaptive offerings that accommodate various abilities and comfort levels. We must also consider family inclusion and addressing geographic barriers for urban veterans who may be farther from federal parks and lands.

Finally, the long-term success for Title II, Subtitle B, hinges on implementing robust tracking systems to measure participation rates, health outcomes, and program effectiveness, while continually striving for participant feedback. Achievement here should be measured by increasing veteran participation in outdoor recreation opportunities and how initial programs evolve based on veteran needs and evidence-based practices. There will be challenges accomplishing this due to the complexity of coordinating across multiple agencies, a persistent stigma around seeking support, and securing necessary appropriations to execute the program.

Again, PVA is grateful for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of our members and the disability community, and to share our views on how the EXPLORE Act could improve their access to the outdoors. This legislation could transform the way people with disabilities engage with federal lands, parks, and other spaces, and increase opportunities for service members, veterans, and their families. PVA would appreciate any opportunity to work with the committee or appropriate federal agencies to see the EXPLORE Act fully implemented, and we 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.