

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**  
**PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA**  
**FOR THE**  
**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH**  
**ON PENDING LEGISLATION**  
**OCTOBER 13, 2021**

Chairwoman Brownley, Ranking Member Bergman, and members of the Subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit our views on pending legislation impacting the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that is before the Subcommittee. No group of veterans understand the full scope of benefits and care provided by VA better than PVA members—veterans who have incurred a spinal cord injury or disorder (SCI/D). Several of these bills will help to ensure veterans receive much needed aid and support. PVA provides comment on the following bills included in today's hearing.

**H.R. 2819, the Solid Start Act of 2021**

VA began the Solid Start Program in 2019 with the ambitious goal of contacting every veteran three times by phone in the first year after their separation from the military to check in on them and connect them to VA programs and benefits. PVA has supported this effort since its inception because we know the value of reaching out to veterans at key points during their transition. We understand that the program is working well, and in addition to providing information and assistance to veterans, it has saved lives. PVA supports H.R. 2819, the Solid Start Act of 2021, which would make the current program permanent with special emphasis to help women veterans connect with VA resources and ensure VA provides information to veterans about state and local resources, as well as connections to local chapters of veterans service organizations.

**H.R. 2916, the VA Medical Cannabis Research Act of 2021**

There is a growing body of evidence that cannabinoids are effective for treating conditions like chronic pain, chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting, sleep disturbances related to obstructive sleep apnea, multiple sclerosis spasticity symptoms, and fibromyalgia. H.R. 2916 directs the VA Secretary to carry out a clinical trial of the effects of cannabis on health conditions like these as well as PTSD. PVA supports evidence-based alternative treatments, including research into the efficacy of medical cannabis. A series of clinical trials on the use of medicinal cannabis would help to determine if it could provide any medical benefits for veterans.

### **H.R. 4575, the Veteran Peer Specialist Act of 2021**

Peer specialists are VA employees who provide support and assistance to help fellow veterans in recovery to successfully engage in mental health and substance use treatment. These specialists support and boost veterans' recovery by helping them navigate the VA health care system; learn coping skills; and develop positive, health-affirming behaviors. PVA supports this bill which requires VA to work with its Inspector General to conduct an in-depth analysis of its current staffing plan for peer specialists who are women and to report to Congress about their geographic distribution. It would also direct VA to examine how that data matches up with the population and geographic distribution of women veterans, what the specified responsibilities are for peer specialists, and what percentage of these specialists focus on mental health and/or suicide prevention. Because the mental health challenges that can accompany disabilities like an SCI/D are often overlooked, we believe that the study should also examine the demographics of existing peer specialists to determine if there are any who have catastrophic disabilities that could work with women veterans with similar injuries or illnesses.

### **H.R. 4794, the Making Advances in Mammography and Medical Options (MAMMO) for Veterans Act**

Women veterans who live with SCI/D often face barriers that can limit effective breast screening. Exam rooms may not be able to accommodate wheelchairs or may not have lifts. Screening equipment may also be inaccessible. Consequently, too many SCI/D veterans receive inadequate screenings. Ensuring access to breast imaging services for SCI/D veterans is a critical part of providing proper health care for our members. Thus, we strongly support the MAMMO for Veterans Act. We are especially pleased with the provisions related to the screening accessibility for veterans living with paralysis and other disabilities. These provisions would help increase mammography accessibility for paralyzed and disabled veterans by requiring a study on the accessibility of breast imaging services within VA. The study would also provide critical data such as cancer rates among veterans with SCI/D, as well as information on our rural veteran population and their access to breast screening health care. In addition, the legislation would require VA to update its policies and directives to ensure that community care settings are accessible and have information on best practices for screening paralyzed and disabled veterans.

### **H.R. 5073, the Revising and Expediting Actions for the Crisis Hotline (REACH) for Veterans Act**

Since its launch in 2007, the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) has served as an important tool for veterans in crisis or families seeking information. PVA supports the REACH Act which directs improvements in staff training and management of the hotline and helps facilitate the VCL's transition to 9-8-8 as part of the national suicide prevention hotline. This legislation would help to ensure that veterans are receiving the top-quality mental health crisis resources they deserve.

### **H.R. 5317, the VA Governors Challenge Expansion Act**

PVA supports this legislation which would expand VA's authority so it can treat Native American tribes as equal to states for the purposes of the Governors Challenge program and allow VA to spend existing funds on implementation of veteran suicide prevention programs developed by states and tribes. Allowing sovereign nations the same respect as states would accelerate state and tribal-level efforts and ensure Native American veterans, who have disproportionately high rates of suicide, can access the mental health care benefits and services they need.

### **Discussion Draft, to amend title 38, United States Code, to expand eligibility for hospital care, medical services, and nursing home care from the Department of Veterans Affairs to include veterans of World War II**

PVA supports this draft bill which would expand eligibility for VA medical services and nursing home care to veterans of World War II (WWII) who are not already covered. VA believes about 300,000 of the roughly 16 million American WWII veterans were still alive as of February 2021. Unfortunately, about 370 of them die each day.<sup>1</sup> Statistics show the youngest WWII veterans are in their 90s and the oldest are over 100 years old. Unless they are already eligible for enrollment in priority group one through five, this bill would ensure WWII veterans are enrolled in priority group six, which at one time included the remaining veterans of the Mexican Border Period and World War I.<sup>2</sup> We believe that expanding health care eligibility to all living World War II veterans is an important way to show our appreciation for their service to our nation.

### **Discussion Draft, the Department of Veterans Affairs Nurse and Physician Assistant Retention and Income Security Enhancement (VA Nurse and Physician Assistant RAISE) Act**

The Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) mission is to honor America's veterans by providing exceptional health care that improves their health and well-being. VHA's ability to fulfil that mission has been strained in recent years due to insufficient numbers of health care providers. Some of these key personnel shortages can be traced to pay caps established more than a decade ago which limit the department's ability to provide competitive salaries or the flexibility to recruit and retain valuable staff. VHA needs the authority to update its current salary pay caps to make compensation levels competitive with the private sector again. PVA gives its strongest endorsement of the VA Nurse Physician Assistant RAISE Act which would provide that change by allowing VHA to increase the rate of pay for Registered Nurses, Advance Practice Nurses, Executive Nurses, Physician Assistants, and other medical positions serving veterans in VHA facilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics on Number of Living WWII Veterans - [How many World War 2 veterans are still alive in 2021? | Interesting Answers](#)

<sup>2</sup> Enrollment Priorities, [38 CFR § 17.36 - Enrollment - provision of hospital and outpatient care to veterans. | CFR | US Law | LII / Legal Information Institute \(cornell.edu\)](#)

**Discussion Draft, the ‘Veterans Census-Enabled National Treatment Equitable Resource Supplement for Mental Health Act of 2021’ or the Vet CENTERS for Mental Health Act of 2021**

Established in 1979, Vet Centers play a critical role in creating support structures for veterans and military servicemembers to promote their successful transition back into to their communities. Unfortunately, there are not enough of them to meet current veteran needs. PVA supports this draft legislation which directs VA to increase the number of Vet Centers in certain states based on population metrics and other factors. Using this commonsense approach would help expand access to mental health counseling across more American communities.

PVA would once again like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit our views on some of the bills being considered today. We look forward to working with the Subcommittee on this legislation and would be happy to take any questions for the record.

**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 2022***

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

***Fiscal Year 2021***

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$455,700.

***Fiscal Year 2020***

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$253,337.

**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.