

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
FOR THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS
ON PENDING LEGISLATION
APRIL 21, 2021**

Chairman Pappas, Ranking Member Mann, 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). PVA provides comment on the following bills included in today's hearing.

H.R. 2082, the VA Supply Chain Resiliency Act

The response to COVID-19 exposed significant weaknesses in VA's supply chain, and some PVA members were affected by them. Early in the pandemic, VA was forced to limit supplies like gloves, gowns, and pads normally provided to SCI/D patients for critical procedures performed in their homes such as bowel, bladder, and wound care. This was a source of great concern when members who relied on VA to prescribe these items had to turn to the private sector to try to obtain them. The VA Supply Chain Resiliency Act could help prevent situations like this from happening again by including VA in the Department of Defense's Warstopper program. Inclusion in that program may give VA greater access to critical supplies like N95 masks, gloves, and gowns and compliment the Department's own efforts through its newly established Regional Readiness Centers.

Discussion Draft, the VA FOIA Reform Act of 2021

PVA supports efforts to require VA to respond quickly to requests for information made pursuant to section 552 of title 5, United States Code. We also support making as much information publicly available as possible, as noted in subsection(b) of the draft. However, it is important for VA to respond to long-pending requests, and if anything, this measure should be strengthened. Veterans and the organizations that advocate on their behalf must have timely access to information about critical matters such as VA's provision of health care and management of claims.

Discussion Draft, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make certain information publicly available on one internet website of the Department of Veterans Affairs

VA provides services directly to veterans, survivors, and other customers; so, clarity in all its communications is critical. This draft bill requires VA to make certain staffing and quality of care data publicly available on its Access to Care internet website (or a successor website). Among other elements, the information published on the website

should include statistics related to patient wait times, effectiveness of care, and staffing and vacancy information. The website must be (1) directly accessible from the main VA website and the main websites of each VA medical center, and (2) understandable and usable by the public. VA would also be required to implement a self-auditing process to assess the accuracy and completeness of data it posts, and through an agreement with the Inspector General of the VA or another entity, validate the results. Additionally, the Government Accountability Office would be tasked with reviewing the website to assess VA's compliance and to provide recommendations on how to improve the website. VA currently publishes patient safety, quality of care, outcome measures and patient wait times on its Access to Care website. Also, staffing and vacancy information is publicly available as required by Public Law 115–182.¹ However, combining all this information on a single site with additional efforts to ensure the veracity of the data, make it more visible and easier to access and could be extremely beneficial for veterans.

Discussion Draft, the Improving VA Accountability to Prevent Sexual Harassment and Discrimination Act of 2021

PVA supports efforts to create a healthy company culture and safe environment for VA employees and veterans alike. The Improving VA Accountability to Prevent Sexual Harassment and Discrimination Act of 2021 realigns authorities and organizational structures, creates reporting timelines, and adds measures to mandate training for new employees to improve VA's EEO programs. This move toward greater accountability would help ensure VA employees are treated with dignity and respect.

Discussion Draft, the VA Beneficiary Debt Collection Improvement Act

This draft legislation seeks to improve the processing of veterans benefits by VA, to limit the authority of the Secretary to recover overpayments made by the Department and other amounts owed by individuals to the United States and to improve due process accorded individuals with respect to such recovery. This bill would make several favorable changes. Language directing the involvement of veterans service organizations (VSOs) in all efforts to clarify and improve VA communications relating to overpayments and debt collection is both needed and welcomed. Historically, the notification process to VSOs has been inconsistent, if not substandard, by VA's Debt Management Center. This section of the bill could be strengthened by inserting language directing the use of an electronic notification system not unlike that of the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) utilized by VBA. We also support the bill's proposal to raise the window to request relief from the recovery of a debt from 180 days to one year and spell out in statute that VA cannot pursue repayment of a debt while it is being challenged for any reason. For all practical purposes, this would amount to collection on a debt being frozen during which time the debt is being contested, whether it be via appeal, compromise offer, or similar action.

¹ [VA-wide workforce data, In accordance with Public Law 115-182, the VA Mission Act of 2018, Section 505.](#)

Discussion Draft, the Strengthening VA Background Checks Act

This draft bill would restrict VA from issuing a flash badge to a covered contractor employee unless a Special Agreement Check of the employee has been conducted.

The VA Secretary is already required to establish and periodically update the process used to determine employment suitability for VA and contract employees. This may include repeating Special Agreement Checks, National Agency Checks with Inquiries, and other means of vetting, after initial suitability determinations are made.

This bill focuses solely on “covered contractor employees” which are permanent or temporary employees of a VA contractor or subcontractor who has or will be permitted to have unescorted access to facilities of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA); or have or will be permitted to have regular or frequent interactions with veterans, family members of veterans, or employees or contractor employees of the Department in facilities of VHA. The additional scrutiny is an appropriate course of action which could go far toward improving the safety and security of VA facilities.

Discussion Draft, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to submit to Congress a plan for expending Coronavirus pandemic funding made available to the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

This draft bill requires VA to submit to Congress a plan for expending pandemic-related funding made available to the Department. It also contains reporting requirements for the VA Inspector General (VAOIG) and the Comptroller General of the United States. Given the large sums of money that have been allocated to the Department during the pandemic, asking them to submit a spending plan with VAOIG and the Comptroller acting as auditors will ensure efficient and effective use of the funds.

PVA would once again like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit our views on some of the legislation 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 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.

Fiscal Year 2019

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$193,247.

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.