

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
OF
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
FOR THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
CONCERNING
PENDING LEGISLATION
MAY 23, 2018

Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke, and members of the subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit our views on legislation pending before the subcommittee.

H.R. 2409

PVA supports H.R. 2409, which would allow servicemembers to terminate their cable, satellite television, and internet access service contracts while deployed. Currently, the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act allows servicemembers to cancel their mobile phone service if they are deployed or receive relocation orders to an area not covered by their current provider. H.R. 2409 would extend that protection to servicemembers' contracts for cable, satellite television, and internet access. As a result of this legislation, providers would be required to refund any prepaid fees and

prohibited from assessing any early termination costs. This bill would help servicemembers by relieving them of these financial concerns when planning for a relocation or deployment.

H.R. 5452, the “Reduce Unemployment for Veterans of All Ages Act of 2018”

PVA strongly supports H.R. 5452, the “Reduce Unemployment for Veterans of All Ages Act of 2018,” which would eliminate the 12-year limit on eligibility for VA’s Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) services. A veteran’s eligibility period for receiving services from VR&E is for a 12-year period beginning on either: (1) the date of separation from military service, or (2) the date the veteran receives a VA disability rating. In order to receive services, a veteran must need vocational rehabilitation to overcome employment barriers due to a service-connected disability.

The current 12-year delimiting date is insufficient to meet the vocational rehabilitation needs of veterans who have incurred significant disabilities. Many conditions worsen overtime and increase disability-related limitations. At any time in their lives, veterans with service-connected disabilities should be able to access VR&E services to allow them to return to work. Unnecessarily limiting access to VR&E services sentences these veterans to a lifetime of decreased opportunities.

H.R. 5538

PVA supports H.R. 5538, a bill that would expand the types of active duty mobilizations for which VA may not penalize a veteran who must subsequently suspend or discontinue participation in VA’s VR&E program. Ensuring access to VR&E services is critical to helping veterans with disabilities return to and remain in the workforce. Expanding 38 U.S.C. § 3105 to include periods of activation in response to a major disaster or emergency and preplanned missions in support of a combatant command will protect more veterans in their pursuit of assistance through VR&E.

H.R. 5644, the “Veterans’ Education, Transition, and Opportunity Prioritization Plan Act of 2018 (VET OPP Act)”

PVA strongly supports H.R. 5644, the “Veterans’ Education, Transition, and Opportunity Prioritization Plan Act of 2018 (VET OPP Act).” This legislation would create a new administration within VA that would include the agency’s education, training, employment, and other programs focused on helping veterans as they transition to civilian life. The Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration would be headed by an Under Secretary for Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition.

Two of the programs that would transition to the new administration include VA’s VR&E program and the Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) program. These programs are relatively small in terms of budget and numbers of veterans served. However, these programs are absolutely vital to veterans who have catastrophic disabilities as a result of their military service. Without them, these veterans would not be able to access independent living services or adapt their homes to meet their disability-related access needs.

Unfortunately, these programs, along with other VA economic opportunity programs, simply are not able to receive the staffing, IT, and other supports needed due to their position within the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). VBA plays the crucial role of providing needed disability compensation and pension benefits to veterans. Removing programs like VR&E from VBA's list of responsibilities will not only allow for more attention to be placed on those programs but it will also allow VBA to better focus on processing claims for compensation and pension benefits.

Under an Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration, programs like VR&E and SAH will receive a higher level of visibility. This increased visibility will foster stronger oversight and accountability for the delivery of services and benefits. We believe that such oversight and accountability will help to foster the innovation needed to ensure that the delivery of these benefits and services are modernized. It will also allow for focused collaboration with other agencies and programs, including the Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service that also serve veterans. This will increase program efficiencies by ensuring programs coordinate their efforts.

H.R. 5649, the “Navy SEAL Chief Petty Officer William ‘Bill’ Mulder (Ret.) Transition Improvement Act of 2018”

PVA supports H.R. 5649, the “Navy SEAL Chief Petty Officer William ‘Bill’ Mulder (Ret.) Transition Improvement Act of 2018.” This bill would make the first significant changes to the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) since 2011. The proposed reforms would require transitioning servicemembers to focus on training that will better assist them in preparing for their individual journeys following their service. Instead of a blanket policy, these new pathways will be designed to address the needs of servicemembers based on several factors including disability, character of discharge, and health (including mental health). Specific training opportunities include preparation for employment, education, vocational training, and entrepreneurship. Servicemembers would also be required to take part in transition counseling a year prior to separation.

For veterans who have experienced a catastrophic disability, the transition from military service begins abruptly. The needs of these veterans as they transition must be carefully considered as they must be informed of not only the compensation and health benefits and services available to them through VA but also the options available for helping them to transition into some type of meaningful employment. We are pleased to see that the pathways take into account not only a servicemembers' disability, but also other life factors that can impact their future choices and opportunities.

More effort is needed, however, to help veterans transitioning after acquiring a catastrophic disability to be fully aware of the opportunities still available to them. Servicemembers who are catastrophically injured and enter into the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) can be forced to endure long wait times until they are discharged keeping them from receiving thousands of dollars in disability benefits from VA and delaying their transition to work or education. These delays can cause veterans to lose hope and hinder movement forward.

This legislation would also make other changes designed to ensure greater access to TAP training, test the efficacy of community providers assisting in transition, and evaluate the success of TAP's content and process. Specifically, it would authorize a five-year pilot to help community organizations in providing transition services. It would also require an independent assessment of the TAP curriculum to make sure that it is effective and commission a five-year longitudinal study to determine whether changes made to TAP increase veterans' transition success.

The longitudinal study provides a real opportunity to also determine the impact that disability has on transition. PVA fully supported the creation of a longitudinal study for clients of VA's VR&E program. We believe that it could be helpful to make connections between veterans who complete TAP and who also participate in VR&E. Such a view would allow for a truly long-term view of the ability of veterans with catastrophic disabilities to reintegrate into the workforce and their communities.

Draft legislation, a bill to amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to provide for the termination by a spouse of a lessee of certain leases when the lessee dies while in military service

PVA supports the intent of the draft legislation which would allow a spouse to terminate certain leases held by a servicemember spouse who dies while in military service. Currently, the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act allows for automotive and property leases to be terminated if the servicemember receives relocation orders. The draft bill would allow these leases to be terminated by the spouse of a servicemember if the servicemember dies during his or her military service.

Although PVA supports the draft language, we believe that spouses of servicemembers who sustain catastrophic injuries during service should also be provided the option to terminate their leases. For example, when a servicemember sustains a spinal cord injury, he or she could spend over a year in rehabilitation facilities, possibly not in the same area where a leased property is located. Furthermore, a car or property could be completely inaccessible for someone needing the use of a wheelchair. Under these circumstances, these automotive and/or property leases could create an undue hardship on the spouse of the servicemember since it could add more financial responsibilities for the spouse to address.

Information Required by Rule XI 2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI 2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the following information is provided regarding federal grants and contracts.

Fiscal Year 2018

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of **National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events** — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$181,000.

Fiscal Year 2017

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of **National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events** — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$275,000.

Fiscal Year 2016

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of **National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events** — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$200,000.

Fiscal Year 2015

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of **National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events** — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — \$425,000.

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.