

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

**PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA**

**TO THE**

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

**CONCERNING PROPOSED LEGISLATION**

**July 17, 2019**

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, 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's members—veterans who have incurred a spinal cord injury or disorder. 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. 561, the “*Protecting Business Opportunities for Veterans Act of 2019*”**

This pending legislation requires participants in the Vets First Program to certify that they are performing the required percentage of work and directs VA to refer suspected violators to the Office of the Inspector General for investigation. It also directs the VA Secretary to consider whether existing administrative and criminal penalties for fraudulent representation would apply in each case. PVA supports this effort to instill parity between veteran-owned small businesses and other small businesses that enter into procurement contracts with the federal government.

**H.R. 1615, the “*Verification Alignment and Service-Disabled Business Adjustment Act*”**

PVA supports this legislation which would transfer the responsibility of certifying Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Businesses (SDVOSBs) and Veteran-Owned Small Businesses (VOSBs) from VA to the Small Business Administration (SBA). Over the past few years, considerable progress has been made streamlining rules and regulations for SBA and VA. Work still remains to rectify differences in the certification process between the two agencies (each one has their own) to eliminate confusion and ensure that contracts are only awarded to companies that are truly deserving of them. SBA's successful employment of [certify.sba.gov](http://certify.sba.gov) uniquely places them in a better position to assimilate accreditation tasks currently being performed by VA's Center for Verification and Evaluation (VA CVE). Through this legislation, self-certification would

be eliminated and the integrity of the SDVOSB and VOSB programs would be enhanced through the use of SBA as the sole certifying agency.

**H.R. 2227, the “*Gold Star Spouses and Spouses of Injured Servicemembers Leasing Relief Expansion Act of 2019*”**

PVA believes the same protections available to widows and widowers through the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) should be provided to the spouses of servicemembers who sustain a catastrophic injury or illness. We support H.R. 2227 which extends home and automobile leasing protections in the SCRA, allowing the spouses of catastrophically injured or ill servicemembers to terminate property leases and automobile leases. Spouses of servicemembers who have sustained a catastrophic injury or illness should not have to worry about the costs of terminating their residential and automotive leases, but instead, be able to focus on the care of their disabled servicemembers.

**H.R. 2924, the “*Housing for Women Veterans Act*”**

VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program awards grants to private nonprofit organizations and consumer cooperatives that provide supportive services to very low-income veteran families living in or transitioning to permanent housing. The Housing for Women Veterans Act would reauthorize funding for the SSVF grant program at \$400 million for Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 through FY 2022 and require that at least \$20 million goes to organizations that have a focus on helping women veterans and their families. H.R. 2924 also requires the VA Secretary to analyze existing VA programs that aid homeless or precariously housed women veterans to identify areas where these programs may be failing them.

Women veterans are at least twice as likely as their nonveteran counterparts to become homeless. They are also more likely to be a single parent with at least one dependent. PVA supports this effort to sustain an extremely valuable program, along with its targeted funding directed toward improving services for women veterans who have increased risk factors for homelessness.

**H.R. 2934, the “*GI Bill Access to Career Credentials Act*”**

VA pays only the test costs for licensing and/or certification for a field of employment, or up to \$2,000 for each test. Payment is issued after you submit proof of payment to VA. The costs of preparatory courses as well as registration and processing fees connected with obtaining a license or certification are not reimbursable.

PVA supports H.R. 2934 which amends Title 38 to allow the use of educational assistance programs under Chapter 33 to pay for preparatory courses for licenses and certification examinations. We believe veterans should be allowed to use their earned education benefits to pay for these courses and other requirements to help them transition to the civilian sector and/or prepare for a new career.

### **Discussion Draft, the “VA Economic Hardship Report Act”**

This draft legislation directs the VA Secretary to compile data and subsequently study the link between certain economic factors and suicide. Suicide is a complex issue with a multitude of contributing factors so examining known causal factors like unemployment and homelessness could be beneficial in reducing the rates of suicide and attempted suicide among veterans. We support this legislation but believe that veterans could be even better served if the study examined all known risk factors, their variance among different groups (e.g., disability status, age group, race, gender) and protective factors that could be reinforced to insulate veterans from the risk of suicide.

### **H.R. 716, the “Homeless Veterans Legal Services Act”**

H.R. 716 authorizes the VA Secretary to enter into partnerships with public and private entities to provide legal services to homeless veterans and veterans at risk of homelessness so long as funds are available. It focuses on legal services related to housing such as eviction defense, foreclosure, and landlord-tenant cases; family law issues to include child support issues, divorce, estate planning, and family reconciliation; and criminal defense matters such as outstanding warrants, fines, and driver’s license revocation.

The lack of such legal services accounted for four of the top 10 unmet needs for all military veterans, according to a 2018 Project CHALENG (Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups) survey by VA.<sup>1</sup> Clearly the need for these services exist and we support this legislation but feel strongly that the Subcommittee should make certain funds are available by authorizing them for this and similar kinds of programs. Furthermore, VA should also support pro bono services offered by law school clinics and other similar entities that want to assist veterans with these services.

### **Discussion Draft, the “Legal Services for Homeless Veterans Act”**

This proposed draft legislation compliments H.R. 716 by authorizing VA to provide grants or enter into cooperative agreements with community entities to provide legal services to veterans experiencing homelessness and veterans who are at risk for becoming homeless within appropriated funds. It further requires VA to submit a biennial report to Congress on the effectiveness of this program, including the number of veterans who were assisted and the types of services that were provided. Again, as indicated by VA’s 2018 Project CHALENG survey, the need for these services are clear

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<sup>1</sup> Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups (CHALENG)  
<https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/docs/CHALENG-2018-factsheet-508.pdf>.

but we call on Congress to take the necessary actions to ensure proper funding for them is available if this legislation is approved. Also, VA should support pro bono services where available.

**Discussion Draft, to “*Authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to Collect Overpayments of Specially Adapted Housing Assistance*”**

This draft legislation amends section 2102 of Title 38 to require that whenever the Secretary finds an overpayment of specially adapted housing assistance has been made to a person as the result of a breach of contract or administrative error it should be repaid to the federal government. As defined in this legislation, a person may be a veteran who applies for assistance; an owner or seller of real estate, a builder, contractor, supplier, tradesperson, corporation, partnership, or person related to or associated with the delivery of assistance; or an attorney, escrow agent, or financial institution that receives or holds escrow funds. It further defines a person as a surviving spouse, heir, assignee, or successor of interest to any of these previously described persons.

We agree that it is reasonable to expect the repayment of an overpayment. However, neither veterans nor their surviving spouses should ever be held responsible for a debt caused by VA’s error. This legislation should be amended to add a requirement that neither veterans nor their surviving spouses will be held liable in that circumstance. Furthermore, the waiver provisions in (f)(4) should be amended to include the veteran’s surviving spouse as being eligible for a waiver from VA and to ensure that a waiver be granted to a veteran or his or her surviving spouse anytime collection of an overpayment would result in financial hardship.

**Discussion Draft, to “*Revise Federal Revenue Limits for Proprietary For-Profit Institutions*”**

PVA supports this draft bill which would set limits on federal funds allowed to be received by for-profit institutions. The “90-10 rule” in the Higher Education Act was created by Congress as a market viability test to protect taxpayers from artificially propping up a failing college of such low quality that no employer or student would be willing to pay for it. The law unintentionally creates a loophole that excludes VA and Department of Defense (DoD) funds in the cap on federal funds that colleges otherwise face. The real-world impact of the loophole means that for every dollar of GI Bill or DoD tuition assistance, schools become eligible for another \$9 of Title IV funds, thus incentivizing some schools to target military-connected students. Closing this loophole is necessary to help protect service members, veterans, and their families. Provisions in this draft legislation would achieve this by defining federal funds to include payments from the GI Bill.

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 you have for the record.