

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**  
**PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA**  
**TO THE**  
**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**  
**ON**  
**"GETTING VETERANS BACK TO WORK AFTER COVID-19"**

**JULY 21, 2020**

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and members of the Subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) would like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss helping veterans return to work once the threat of COVID-19 has subsided.

Prior to the pandemic, the economy was strong and there was a high demand for workers, including veterans, in nearly all sectors. Across the country, companies seek out veterans with the hopes of finding highly qualified and motivated candidates. The U.S Department of Labor (DOL) reported that veteran unemployment numbers were at the lowest rate in almost two decades.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, employment rates for veterans with significant disabilities, including many PVA members, have consistently lagged behind those of their counterparts without disabilities. According to DOL's statistics, veterans with service-connected disabilities are less likely to participate in the labor force than veterans without disabilities.<sup>2</sup>

Veterans with non-service-connected disabilities experience similar challenges; only 37 percent are employed compared to more than 75 percent of veterans without disabilities.<sup>3</sup> According to a survey of the ADA National Network, 57 percent of veterans with disabilities were concerned about discrimination because of their disability during the hiring process.<sup>4</sup> While veterans with disabilities, especially those with catastrophic disabilities faced challenges in finding and obtaining employment within their capabilities, we were beginning to see an uptick in employment opportunities for this

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/newsletter#:~:text=Additionally%2C%20the%20veteran%20unemployment%20rate,View%20the%20full%20report>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/vet.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://adata.org/factsheet/employment-data-veterans-disabilities>

<sup>4</sup> <https://adata.org/factsheet/employment-data-veterans-disabilities>

population. According to a Kessler Foundation study, Americans with disabilities were being employed at an increased rate. Between December 2019 and March 2020, people with disabilities had increased their participation in the U.S. workforce.<sup>5</sup>

Additional employment challenges for veterans include age, gender, race, and geography. According to DOL's, Bureau of Labor Statistics, among the 284,000 unemployed veterans in 2019, 56 percent were ages 25 to 54, 39 percent were age 55 and over, and 5 percent were ages 18 to 24.<sup>6</sup> And according to a 2018 Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) report, minority veterans face a 44 percent higher risk of unemployment than non-minority veterans.<sup>7</sup> Working-age rural veterans (18 to 64 years old) had a lower employment rate, lower than rural nonveterans and urban veterans.<sup>8</sup>

Once the national pandemic took hold, the number of unemployed veterans almost tripled.<sup>9</sup> Fourteen percent of veterans are working in the top five industries most impacted by COVID.<sup>10</sup> A recent study by the Brookings Institute reported that 42 percent of jobs lost to COVID are not returning.<sup>11</sup> The Kessler Foundation reported that as of June 2020, there have been some returns to normal in employment for Americans with disabilities, but those numbers remain lower than a year prior.<sup>12</sup> A recent survey of PVA members showed that the pandemic has caused employment-related losses for them, their families, and caregivers.

For some veterans with disabilities an immediate return to work is necessary. PVA is concerned that those who were previously facing challenges in the employment landscape will only see these challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and current economic recession.

PVA members, veterans with spinal-cord injuries and disorders, face even greater challenges than their peers. Respiratory complications are the leading cause of death for people with spinal cord injuries. According to the Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation, some people with paralysis have respiratory insufficiency. Because they may not have use of their abdominal or intercostal muscles, which form the wall of the chest, they lose the ability to force a cough, and a productive cough is critical for lung

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<sup>5</sup> <https://kesslerfoundation.org/press-release/ntide-february-2020-jobs-report-third-month-job-gains-americans-disabilities>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/vet.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Minority\\_Veterans\\_Report.pdf](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Minority_Veterans_Report.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/vets/latest-numbers>

<sup>10</sup> <https://bobwoodrufffoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Veterans-and-COVID19-Exec-Summary-1.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/bpea-articles/covid-19-is-also-a-reallocation-shock/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://researchondisability.org/home/ntide/ntide-news-item/2020/07/02/ntide-june-2020-jobs-report-numbers-up-but-covid-spikes-may-impact-economic-recovery>

clearance, making them susceptible to respiratory infections. Due to this and other risk factors, COVID-19 is a particularly high threat for many PVA members.

As we initiate efforts to help get veterans back to work, it is essential we focus our valuable resources and time on getting them into jobs that are in demand. The COVID-19 pandemic has helped change the narrative around work-from-home and the productivity of employees. PVA's employment program, PAVE, has seen an increase in employers' willingness to hire individuals for full-time work-from-home positions. In the long run, this development will prove to be beneficial for all individuals with disabilities.

There are several federal government programs that provide support to the larger veteran community. Many of these programs focus their resources on transitioning service members and post-9/11 veterans, even though veterans with disabilities, older veterans, and those in remote areas continue to face significant challenges, including high unemployment and underemployment. Those who were facing hardships before COVID will only see those challenges exacerbated due to the economic recession and the resulting job loss. PVA believes existing federal programs must expand their focus to include those with significant or catastrophic disabilities, non-service-connected disabled veterans, older veterans, and those in rural communities.

DOL's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL VETS) has developed a strong suite of programs primarily focused on transitioning service members and engaging employers through the HIRE Vets Medallion Program. While the HIRE Vets Medallion Program is to be commended for recognizing employers who hire veterans, none of the program criteria focus on the number of veterans with disabilities, especially veterans with catastrophic disability. We strongly encourage that DOL VETS lead the way by encouraging and recognizing employers who strive to be inclusive.

PVA also recommends that DOL VETS continue to focus on the broader veteran population by developing more paid training and apprenticeship programs for veterans who have already entered the workforce, significantly disabled veterans, non-service-connected disabled veterans, and those in remote areas. Additionally, PVA recommends swift implementation of the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program within DOL VETS that Congress approved last year (Public Law No: 116-93). The crux of this program is to help monitor and highlight the employment struggles and job opportunities for veterans with disabilities and to coordinate and promote federal data, research, and services aimed at addressing this ongoing challenge. We believe that this office is essential to the employment success of disabled veterans.

VA's Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program has successfully assisted many service-connected veterans in pursuing employment and educational opportunities. PVA remains concerned, however, about the high caseloads VR&E counselors maintain as it limits the amount of time they are able to spend with individual

clients assessing their current status, their needs, their goals, and what meaningful employment is for that veteran. Many veterans also continue to experience high rates of turnover of their VR&E counselors, which can affect their long-term success in the program.

As a result, PVA would like to see a VA Office of Inspector General assessment of the VR&E program staff outlining the amount of time each counselor spends working with a veteran, rate of turnover of staff, and length of employment for veterans placed into positions through VR&E. Ensuring that there are sufficient staffing levels and a low rate of attrition is vital to the success of this program. In the meantime, PVA supports a temporary extension of the eligibility period for veterans participating in the VR&E program to account for disruptions in the employment and educational process due to COVID-19 and the accompanying economic recession.

Finally, the earlier we engage transitioning service members with disabilities and veterans with disabilities in the employment process the more likely they are to re-enter the workforce with meaningful careers. PVA strongly recommends that the Department of Defense (DoD), DOL, and VA work together on a comprehensive program for service members who are processing out of the military due to a disability to educate them on their rights and opportunities. We would like to see the Transition Assistance Program amended to include information on the Americans with Disabilities Act and how it applies to not only their everyday lives, but also work opportunities. Whether a veteran considers him or herself to be a paralyzed veteran, disabled veteran, wounded warrior, or other term, it is imperative these veterans understand their civil rights as a person with a disability and the accommodations and services available to them as such. This approach must be a joint effort between DOL, DoD, and VA.

There are also many non-governmental organizations that provide robust employment services and training programs for veterans. PVA's PAVE program provides high-touch support to assist all members of the veteran community through the career exploration process. The foundation of our program is our team of vocational rehabilitation counselors and employment analysts who provide one-on-one engagement to help members of the veteran community find meaningful employment, educational, and volunteer opportunities. While we work with all members of the veteran community, including veterans, military and veteran spouses, and military and veteran caregivers, the majority of those with whom we work have a complex barrier to employment, such as a catastrophic disability, non-service connected injury, history of homelessness, significant break from the workforce, incarceration or other challenges.

Our Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors are specially trained to help veterans with disabilities live fuller, more independent lives by assisting them in securing gainful employment. Their clients are people coping with physical disabilities and injuries,

mental illness, psychological disorders, or substance abuse problems. These counselors often work directly with clients as well as their families, doctors, speech therapists, physical therapists, psychologists, and other service providers to optimize a client's readiness for work. The low level of bureaucracy within the PAVE program empowers our staff to take a long-term view of individual client success without worrying about placement quotas or artificial timelines, and provides more opportunity to incorporate volunteer and educational opportunities that will lead to better paid employment success. PAVE staff know what questions to ask to better understand each veteran's unique circumstance and benchmark for success. PAVE staff meet these individuals where they are in the process to focus on their individual trajectory as they explore options, rather than following a pre-prescribed artificial point that is not based on reality.

In late January, PVA launched PAVE Connect, a highly interactive, small group virtual engagement initiative to reach those who do not have the time, means, or ability to attend traditional employment or educational events — such as hiring fairs. Veterans with disabilities, especially those who are significantly injured or ill, are less likely to participate in public events with crowds or in locations that are not easily accessible. By providing online engagement opportunities to meet them at their point of need, we are reaching more veterans and equipping them with the essential skills to thrive in the workforce. While PAVE Connect was launched pre-COVID-19, we have seen an increase in participation due to high-unemployment and the need for more virtual programming.

Overall, the PAVE program has seen an increase in demand for our services. We currently have over 820 veterans, spouses, and caregivers in our program among seven direct service staff. This represents not only an increase in new clients, but also a shift in clients who lost employment through permanent job loss, furlough, or reduction in hours. Nearly 60 percent of the veterans we are currently working with have a service-connected rating of 60 percent or higher, meaning they fall into an employment category that is challenging. Roughly half are over the age of 50, which presents additional challenges.

Due to their health risks, high unemployment, and the demand for work-from-home positions, veterans with disabilities need to plan their return to employment in a different way. PVA has been advising veterans in our PAVE program by a timeline-based approach to help them plan their return to employment. PVA has broken this down into short-term (0-6 months), medium term (6-12 months), and long-term (12 months--2+ years) to help with the planning process.

For veterans with catastrophic disabilities to find employment in the short-term, it is necessary to have access to [technology and electronic equipment](#), customer

service skills, and computer skills. If you are interested in work and have some expertise

but need to develop new or additional skill sets, you probably fall into the medium-term timeframe for return to work. To be well prepared for employment in the 6-9-month range, it is important to develop new skills by using online training and career tool resources. Some skills that can be developed to pursue future work include basic computer skills (Microsoft Office suite, basic IT programs, etc.), trade certificates (HVAC, Medical Coding, Real Estate, etc.) and other short-term training options. Once acquired, these skills can help veterans with disabilities find employment.

The long-term approach to employment for veterans with disabilities is difficult to address. Many veterans with significant disabilities will need to wait until the COVID-19 pandemic is over or a vaccine has been created to return to in-person work and do not match the current skills needed for work from home opportunities. In these instances, PVA is advising veterans to consider utilizing this time to pursue long-term educational (bachelors or masters degrees) or training goals. By pursuing education, training, or passion goals veterans will be well-equipped to re-enter the workforce when the pandemic subsides or they meet the needs for work-from-home opportunities.

In addition to PAVE, there are many other highly successful programs that provide much needed services to veterans and veterans with disabilities. These include programs such as Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families Onward to Opportunity program, Tech for Troops, Melwood's abilIT, and other programs that are low or no-cost training services.

Ultimately, we must think beyond what we traditionally do for veterans seeking employment and adopt innovative ways forward for veterans with disabilities, whether service connected or non-service connected. No one entity can meet the needs of all disabled veterans. This means offering robust training and upskilling programs, including paid training and internship programs to bridge the financial gap, and more guided employment programs to assist veterans with disabilities in exploring new career fields.

Thus, PVA strongly supports H.R. 7111 as essential legislation to strengthen existing retraining job opportunities and establish new resources to get veterans employed and back on their feet. We call on this Subcommittee to move this legislation through the House and to the Senate as quickly as possible. Since the problem it looks to address is COVID-related and the need to do something now is great, we strongly recommend this legislation be incorporated into pandemic relief legislation now being discussed in Congress.

We also urge members of the Subcommittee to support H.R. 5761, the AUTO for Veterans Act, to enable service-connected veterans to have a second opportunity to

receive a grant towards the purchase of a new, adapted vehicle. Some veterans with catastrophic disabilities relied on public transportation to get to and from work. Now, due to reduced or eliminated transit schedules, as well as the risk to health, these veterans may no longer be able to do so. Increased access to safe and accessible transportation is needed. We further ask Congress to consider instituting a grant for veterans with non-service-connected spinal cord injuries or disorders towards the purchase of adaptive equipment such as hand controls, transfer seats, or wheelchair locks to empower these veterans with the ability to transport themselves to medical appointments, employment, and activities of daily living such as grocery shopping. PVA stands ready to lend support to the Subcommittee in creating a grant program for these veterans.

Finally, we cannot have a robust discussion around employment if we do not discuss the health benefits of meaningful and gainful employment. The shelter in place orders have seen a drastic rise in calls to the VA crisis line as well as mental health telehealth appointments. Isolation is a strong predictor of suicide and can lead to exacerbation of mental illness and disorder symptoms and can contribute to conditions such as depression, anxiety, and dementia.<sup>13</sup> Kate Callahan, PVA Member and Recreational Therapist shares, “Without Susan Prokop and PAVE, I fear I would have developed depression from lack of social interaction and life purpose. I see it often in my less involved peers. I can only hope for them to get more involved in life and enjoy it again, as I am.” Employment can positively factor into recovery from illness and enhancement of mental wellness, especially when compared to unemployment. Meaningful employment provides daily structure, gives a person a sense of worth, and supports social engagement.<sup>14</sup> Thus, not only is it financially important to get veterans back to work, it is also better for their overall health.

PVA would once again like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit our views on return to work after COVID. We would be happy to take any questions you have for the record.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/isolation-and-mental-health>

<sup>14</sup> Modini, M., Joyce, S., Mykletun, A., Christensen, H., Bryant, R. A., Mitchell, P. B., & Harvey, S. B. (2016). The mental health benefits of employment: Results of a systematic meta-review. *Australasian psychiatry: bulletin of Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists*, 24(4), 331–336. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1039856215618523>

## **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 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.

### ***Fiscal Year 2018***

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

## **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.