

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
FOR THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
CONCERNING VETERAN EMPLOYMENT AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
MAY 25, 2021**

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and members of the Subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit our views on COVID's continued impact on veteran employment. No group of veterans understand the full scope of benefits and care provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) better than PVA members, and some of the programs being discussed today can help veterans who have incurred a spinal cord injury or disorder (SCI/D) lead more meaningful and productive lives.

Prior to the pandemic, veteran unemployment numbers were at historic lows, and while we are seeing a slow, steady rise in employment, more work remains to be done. There are traditionally underserved veteran populations who need targeted support to re-enter the workforce. Getting these veterans back to work is not only financially important but will improve their quality of life and provide them with a sense of purpose.

The foundations of a purposeful, well-balanced life are employment, health care, transportation, family and friends, and a sense of community. Often when one of these components is out of balance, a veteran's mental health suffers. Therefore, as we look for ways to help veterans return to the workforce, it is essential we pay attention to special and underserved populations. In improving benefits for these veterans, we enhance the provision of services for all veterans.

Enhance Employment Services for Specific Populations

Even before the pandemic, employment rates for veterans with significant disabilities, such as PVA members, consistently lagged behind those of their counterparts without disabilities. As vaccines are increasing in distribution and Congress engages in efforts to get unemployed individuals back to work, the lag for employment of veterans with significant disabilities is still as great as ever. Veterans with disabilities are less likely to participate in the labor force than veterans without disabilities. Repeatedly, the data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show the highest numbers of veterans who are unemployed are veterans with service-connected disability ratings above 60 percent. What is even more upsetting is the numbers are showing these veterans are leaving or are not in the workforce anymore. And yet, none of the recent programs including the Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses for Training Providers (VET TEC) or the Veterans Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP) offer a preference for veterans with disabilities.

Addressing employment barriers for veterans requires a shift in focus and targeted allocation of resources. These barriers include age, gender, race, disability, and

geography. While there are several federal government programs that provide support to the broader veteran community, many of these programs focus their resources on transitioning service members and post-9/11 veterans. This often means veterans with disabilities, older veterans, and those in remote or rural areas, who continue to face significant employment challenges, including high unemployment and underemployment, are left behind. Existing federal programs must expand their focus to include those with significant or catastrophic disabilities, non-service-connected disabled veterans, older veterans, minority veterans, and those in rural communities.

Recent legislative efforts, including the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-315); H.R. 447, the National Apprenticeship Act of 2021; and H.R. 2523, the Training in High-Demand Roles to Improve Veteran Employment Act, focus on getting veterans into high-demand jobs, increasing public private partnerships to augment paid training and internship opportunities, and establishing guided employment programs. But none of these have specific language or preference to support veterans with disabilities nor any of the underserved populations of veterans previously identified. We must ensure that programs and outreach efforts are more inclusive and target those with higher levels of unemployment or underemployment.

Improve the Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Application Process and Delivery of Services

VA's VR&E program has successfully assisted many service-connected veterans in pursuing employment and educational opportunities. However, the process of applying for VR&E is becoming more and more complex and many veterans need an outside advocate to fully navigate the process. VR&E benefits are provided on a subjective basis, and while VR&E counselors need to be able to determine the individual needs for each of their clients, more clarity is needed in the process. The appeals process also needs to be made clearer and more accessible for veterans. Finally, we are concerned 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.

While we are grateful the delimitation date for the VR&E program has been removed for those who leave the service after 2013, we will not see the benefit of this change until 2025—nearly four years after a pandemic and significant economic recession. PVA strongly believes the delimitation date for VR&E should be eliminated altogether so VA can provide lifelong service to veterans with service-connected conditions. This will allow the program to meet the changing needs of veterans as they age into their disability.

PVA's Veterans Career Program offers high-touch, one-on-one support to members of the veteran community to help them find meaningful employment, education, or volunteer opportunities. In working with our clients, we have heard about issues our veterans have had when interacting with the VR&E program. Some of the top issues or concerns raised by our vocational rehabilitation counselors and veterans who have used the program, or attempted to use it, include:

- High counselor turnover rates;
- Lack of timely response from counselors to veterans' email and voice messages;
- High caseloads that do not allow counselors to spend enough time to fully review veterans' files or appropriately support those with significant disabilities;
- Cumbersome paperwork and processes, which have resulted in VR&E referring veterans to PVA's career program for help in navigating VA's process;
- Inconsistency in applying the program;
- Difficult to understand correspondence that is full of "legalese," which means some veterans are unsure of what to do, how to appeal, or how to seek assistance if something in their plan changes;
- No ongoing follow up with veterans to ensure they are successful once employed; and
- Focus on those veterans seeking full-time employment, which can lead counselors to push our members toward applying for Individual Unemployability.

PVA requests a VA Office of Inspector General (VAOIG) 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. We would also like to see VAOIG review the VR&E intake process and procedures. We think this review is especially important as we look at the high number of veterans who served after September 11, 2001, with traumatic brain injuries, military sexual trauma, and other mental health challenges which might make the complicated process of applying for VR&E a barrier to veterans seeking this service.

Enhance the Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL VETS) Focus on Disabled Veterans

DOL VETS has an important role to play in helping veterans, including those with barriers to employment, return to work. As DOL VETS continues to focus on the broader veteran population, they must also work to develop 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. In 2019, Congress approved legislation (P.L. 116-93) that established a Disabled Veterans Outreach Program within DOL VETS to help monitor and highlight the employment struggles and job opportunities for veterans with disabilities, both service-connected and non-service connected, 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. Unfortunately, the position of research analyst for DOL VETS has yet to be filled.

Improve Communications on VA Employment Programs and Services

Assisting America's veterans in returning to the workforce during the pandemic can be challenging. Each generation has their preferred methods of contact and communication; however, VA continues to rely on antiquated methods for advertising employment programs and services. Pamphlets and flyers sit outdated and unused on shelves as

offices that pivoted to telework have been slow to re-open following the onset of the pandemic. A new communication strategy using multiple methods is needed to ensure the Departments' message is reaching all generations of veterans. We welcome the opportunity to partner with VA to help spread the message to new groups of veterans through our virtual career seminars or through other avenues.

Increase Automobile Allowance Grants and Access to Adaptive Equipment

The pandemic demonstrated how important it is for catastrophically disabled veterans to have access to an adapted vehicle to get them to and from their health care appointments, work, school, and meet family obligations. Also, there is a direct correlation between transportation self-efficacy and employment for veterans with catastrophic disabilities. Therefore, PVA urges Congress to pass H.R. 1631, the Advancing Uniform Transportation Opportunities for Veterans Act or AUTO for Veterans Act, or H.R. 3304, the Care Access Resources (CARS) for Veterans Act so veterans who need to replace their adaptable vehicles can purchase them.

We also urge Congress to provide assistance for veterans with non-service-connected catastrophic disabilities like SCI/D 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 instrumental activities of daily living such as grocery shopping for veterans enrolled in VA healthcare with qualifying conditions. VA has already committed to caring for the health of these veterans. It only makes sense to ensure they can transport themselves to and from medical appointments and other obligations.

As we look at how to get unemployed veterans back to work, focusing on underserved populations is where the most attention and focus are needed to move the needle forward. PVA would once again like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit our views on how our nation can support our veterans' employment through and after COVID-19. We will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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.