

**STATEMENT OF
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
ON PENDING LEGISLATION
MARCH 10, 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 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 the aid and support they have earned.

PVA provides comment on the following bills included in today's hearing.

Discussion Draft, "To rename the Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation Program as the Vocational Readiness and Employment Program, and for other purposes."

While we understand the word rehabilitation sometimes has a negative connotation that correlates with the criminal justice system or substance misuse programs, according to dictionary.com, the term rehabilitation also means *"to restore to a condition of good health, ability to work, or the like."* Changing the name of the VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program (VR&E) to Vocational Readiness and Employment Program only confuses and clouds the meaning of the program. Identifying it as a readiness program might lead all veterans to think they are eligible for its services, which they are not. We have also not seen any empirical evidence suggesting the term rehabilitation prevents veterans from accessing this service. Instead, PVA would rather see time and attention paid to better supporting the program and marketing its advantages, which are to aid service-connected disabled veterans in finding gainful and meaningful employment.

Discussion Draft, "To amend title 38, United States Code, to make a technical correction to clarify that colleges and universities located outside the United States may participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs."

Since veterans are eligible to use their GI Bill outside of the United States, PVA sees no reason not to allow colleges and universities located outside of the United States to participate in the yellow ribbon program, so long as the schools are in good standing.

Discussion Draft, "To amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify the location of an educational institution conducting programs of education exclusively by

distance learning for purposes of the Department of Veterans Affairs approval process.”

This draft legislation allows the VA Secretary to determine the location of an online school to be either the address registered with the Department of Education or the location where the school’s leadership, administration staff, and records are kept for program approval. PVA would need to know what factors would be used to determine which address would be selected before we could lend our support to this legislation. We understand this draft bill is an attempt to lower costs and have concerns that veterans in the middle of their educational programs might see a vast reduction in housing allowance. Such a reduction may place them in a financial hardship, and render them unable to complete their course of study. This concern could be overcome by including grandfathering language for student veterans who are already in a program of study from being affected.

Discussion Draft, “To amend title 38, United States Code, to ensure that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs repays members of the Armed Forces for certain contributions made by such members towards Post-9/11 Educational Assistance.”

This draft bill eliminates the need for service members to wait until their final monthly housing payment in order to be repaid the \$1,200 they paid into the Montgomery GI Bill. The need for this legislation was caused by a loophole that disqualifies actively serving members from reimbursement. We can support this draft bill if its effective date is backdated to restore eligibility to all affected service members.

Discussion Draft, “To authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to enter into a memorandum of understanding with the Secretary of Health and Human Services to coordinate case management services for veterans receiving housing vouchers under Tribal HUD-VASH program.”

PVA supports this draft legislation and applauds the effort to ensure our Native American brothers and sisters in arms are affordably and safely housed.

Discussion Draft, “To amend titles 38 and 10, United States Code, to make certain improvements to educational assistance administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and to the Transition Assistance Program and Skillbridge Program of the Department of Defense.”

While we applaud this effort to increase eligibility for certain education benefits, especially for the Guard and Reserve, we have concerns that this complex legislation may unintentionally open up what counts as “qualifying service,” and could make people eligible for benefits for which they are not currently eligible. Increasing the number of individuals eligible for VA benefits and services may overwhelm the VA health care system as well as other programs, and PVA does not support the draft legislation as it is currently written.

Discussion Draft, “To amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to reimburse a recipient of a certain grant, made by the Secretary relating to homeless veterans, the fee to use the homeless management information system.”

The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is a locally administered, electronic data collection system that stores longitudinal personal-level information about persons who access the homeless service system. HMIS is a response to a congressional directive to capture better data on homelessness. VA grantees are required to participate in HMIS per 38 C.F.R. §62.71 to provide VA with the necessary information to assess the outcomes associated with grantees' programs.

PVA supports this draft bill which gives the VA Secretary the authority to reimburse a recipient of a grant relating to homeless veterans the fees associated with the use of HMIS. While the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides grants to improve HMIS for existing users, passing this bill would allow grantees to use the system as mandated by HUD at little or no cost, which may prevent inconsistencies or lack of efficient reporting.

Discussion Draft, “Native VetSuccess on Tribal Colleges and Universities Pilot Program Act.”

The VetSuccess on Campus program helps service members, veterans, and eligible dependents succeed in their educational goals. The program provides on campus benefits assistance and counseling and is administered through the VR&E program. PVA supports this draft legislation which would establish a pilot program at three Tribal colleges and universities using a full-time VetSuccess on Campus Counselor and a full-time Vet Center Outreach Coordinator. We believe these valuable services will be a tremendous benefit to the enrolled veterans.

Discussion Draft, “To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to conduct consumer testing to improve the internet website of the Department of Veterans Affairs that provides individuals with postsecondary education information.”

PVA is not opposed to this draft bill nor its thorough review of the Comparison Tool. The Tool provides tremendous benefit to military service members and veterans when choosing their academic institutions. However, this draft legislation could be enhanced by inserting requirements for VA to include student outcome metrics from the College Scorecard/College Navigator on the Tool and to provide some sort of complaint system. Additionally, before expending significant sums of money to evaluate the Tool, we recommend a U.S. Government Accountability Office report be requested to determine what metrics are needed.

Discussion Draft, “To amend title 38, United States Code, and the Honoring America’s Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act of 2012, to make certain enhancements to grants and agreements between the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and entities that provide services to homeless veterans.”

PVA supports this draft legislation which aims to reduce veteran homelessness by increasing per diem as needed among those working to serve homeless veterans, opening jobs for social workers as case managers, and adding employees where needed when HUD-VASH vouchers go unused.

H.R. 5324, the “Sergeant Daniel Somers Veterans Network of Support Act of 2019”

H.R. 5324 directs VA to conduct a pilot program that allows active duty service members who are separating from the military to designate up to ten friends and family members, selected by the veteran, to receive information from VA such as:

- Services and benefits offered to veterans and their family members by the Department of Veterans Affairs;
- Challenges and stresses that might accompany transitioning from service in the Armed Forces to civilian life;
- Services available to veterans and their family members to cope with the experiences and challenges of service in the Armed Forces and transition from such service to civilian life;
- Services available through community partner organizations to support veterans and their family members;
- Services available through federal, state, and local government agencies to support veterans and their family members;
- The environmental health registry program, health and wellness programs, and resources for preventing and managing diseases and illnesses;
- A toll-free telephone number through which such persons who elect to receive information under the pilot program may request information regarding the program;
- Such other matters as the Secretary, in consultation with members of the Armed Forces and such persons who elect to receive information under the pilot program, determines to be appropriate.

Recent research has shown the 12-month window following separation from military service is one of the highest risk periods for suicide. While there is no one solution, PVA believes the Sergeant Daniel Somers Veterans Network of Support Act of 2019 provides one answer to help empower families and friends of newly separated veterans to get and remain connected to the supports and services the veteran is entitled to. We hope this bill is passed quickly and the pilot program is rolled out as soon as possible. In order for it to be successful, Congress will need to provide funding for the additional time and staffing this program will need.

H.R. 5056, the “*Modern GI Bill Act*”

PVA does not believe that H.R. 5056 is necessary at this time because other programs exist to assist with the repayment of federal student loans. These programs simply need to be updated or implemented.

H.R. 2224, the “*Homeless Veterans with Children Reintegration Act*”

This legislation would direct the Department of Labor (DOL) to prioritize homeless veterans with dependent children within the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program, which provides important wrap-around services necessary to support a veteran with children. It would also require DOL to study any gaps in access to shelter, safety, and other relevant services for homeless veterans with dependent children. Garnering this information could help policymakers better understand the issues and identify opportunities to resolve issues facing homeless veterans with children. PVA supports H.R. 2224 and hopes this bill is swiftly passed and implemented.

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.

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.