



# Washington Update

[WATCH PVA National President Robert Thomas testify before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee on Strengthening Services for Veterans with SCI/D](#) We will have more coverage in the next Update.

## GOVERNMENT FUNDING UPDATE

It's the middle of September and Congress finds itself in a familiar place, staring at a possible government shutdown. The current fiscal year ends on September 30, and Congress has yet to finalize any of the 12 annual funding bills. Once again, lawmakers will need to use a continuing resolution (CR) to keep the government running past the end of the month. A CR extends funding into the new fiscal year, usually at the previous year's levels. On September 19, the House passed a short-term bill primarily along party lines to fund the government through the week before Thanksgiving. A CR of that length would give Congress seven additional weeks to work on the regular funding bills. The Senate failed to move the measure. Congress is out the week of September 22. Members of the House aren't expected to return until October 1. This sets up the possibility of a government shutdown if the Senate can't pass the House CR.

## PVA PARTICIPATES IN NATIONAL COUNCIL ON DISABILITY PANEL ON GROUND TRANSPORTATION

On August 29, Chief Policy Officer, Heather Ansley, was asked to present as part of a panel of experts on accessibility and ground transportation at the quarterly National Council on Disability (NCD) meeting in

Washington, D.C. NCD addresses the concerns of people with disabilities by advising public policy. The panel discussion titled, "Current State of Ground Transportation for People with Mobility Disabilities: Taxis, Rideshares, Paratransit, Microtransit, Shuttles," featured speakers from all over the industry. Discussions included advocating for increased disability access in ground transportation, steps that rideshare companies can take to improve the travel experience, and the future of accessible transit. In July, NCD released a report titled, "[Ground Transportation for People with Mobility Disabilities 2025: Challenges and Progress](#)," which details many transportation issues for wheelchair users in the United States.

## PVA SUBMITS COMMENTS ON OFCCP PROPOSAL ON EMPLOYMENT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

In early September, PVA submitted public comments in opposition to the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs' (OFCCP) proposed rule, "[Modifications to the Regulations Implementing Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as Amended](#)." The rule proposes to eliminate the 7 percent utilization goal for federal contractors to employ people with disabilities and the requirement that contractors invite job applicants to voluntarily self-identify as people with disabilities. Both requirements,



along with an annual analysis and data collection that DOL is also proposing to eliminate, have been integral to Section 503's affirmative action requirements. If implemented, the proposed rule would eliminate several critically important elements of OFCCP's current rule implementing the affirmative action requirements of Section 503, and without these provisions, the rule would become largely ineffective.

[PVA's comments](#) expressed our concern about the proposed rule and urged OFCCP to withdraw them. The comments detailed how the requirements are critically important to ensuring that Section 503 is meaningfully implemented, and they provide certainty for contractors with respect to what they need to do to comply. The comments also discussed how eliminating the requirements would hurt disabled veterans, people with disabilities, contractors and subcontractors alike. Congress has repeatedly recognized the need for federal agencies and contractors to take affirmative actions to ensure equal employment opportunities. PVA will continue to monitor this rulemaking.

#### **SVAC HEARING TO CONSIDER KAREN BRAZELL AS VA UNDER SECRETARY FOR BENEFITS**

On September 10, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) conducted a hearing to consider the nomination of Karen Brazell for the position of VA Under Secretary for Benefits. Brazell, a United States Army veteran, previously served as the Principle Executive Director and VA Chief Acquisition Officer in the Office of Acquisition, Logistics, and Construction and the Acting Assistant Secretary in the Office of Enterprise Integration. In these roles, she expedited the Community Care Network contracts to expand private-sector care and modernized Veterans Benefits Administration systems to streamline their intake, scheduling, and monitoring.

During her opening statement, Brazell highlighted her and her family's history of service to this nation, both in uniform and in public service. Not only has she served but her husband retired from the Army, her father was a Vietnam veteran, and both her grandfathers served in WWII. She also emphasized her 40-year career in the

military, government, and industry working on improving veterans' access to benefits. During the question-and-answer portion, she repeatedly espoused that she would do all that she could to ensure veterans receive the benefits that they are entitled to. In one line of questioning, she was asked about capping the attorney's fees for those Marines who were exposed to toxins while stationed at Camp Lejeune. She replied, "No veteran should ever have to pay a third party for access to their earned benefits."

The hearing concluded with no timetable for a final vote. You can watch the video of the hearing and read Brazell's submitted testimony [here](#).

#### **DOE FURTHER EXTENDS EFFECTIVE DATE OF DIRECT FINAL RULE**

On September 11, the Department of Energy (DOE) [announced](#) another extension of the effective date of the direct final rule titled, "Rescinding Regulations Related to Nondiscrimination in Federally Assisted Programs or Activities (General Provisions)." The direct final rule would eliminate critical systems ensuring physical access to facilities receiving DOE funds. DOE announced it is further extending the date to continue considering comments submitted in response to the proposal. The department previously extended the effective date on June 14 due to the receipt of significant adverse comments. The effective date of the direct final rule has been delayed until December 10. PVA submitted comments expressing our concern about the proposed rule and urged DOE to withdraw it. PVA will continue to monitor this issue.

#### **WAYS AND MEANS SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING ON SOCIAL SECURITY AND BARRIERS TO WORK**

On September 9, the Social Security and Work and Welfare subcommittees of the House Ways and Means Committee held a hearing titled, "Untapped Talent in America: Removing Barriers to Work and Supporting Opportunity for Individuals with Disabilities."



The witnesses shared examples of the complicated nature of navigating benefits and conflicts in accessing benefits that often create unnecessary barriers. While the hearing was billed as “untapped talent in America,” the emerging themes seemed to focus on the general lack of information for most beneficiaries using Social Security programs.

The robust hearing dug into the complications faced by beneficiaries when it comes to utilizing the full scope of benefits available to low-income families and people with disabilities. Discussions included reducing barriers to competitive integrated employment, accessing ABLE accounts, and increasing education about the programs that assist people with disabilities in employment.

You can watch the hearing [here](#).

### HOUSE PASSES ANNUAL DEFENSE POLICY BILL

The annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) provides authorization of appropriations for the Department of Defense (DOD), nuclear weapons programs of the Department of Energy, and other defense-related activities. In addition to serving as an authorization of appropriations, the NDAA establishes defense policies and restrictions, and addresses organizational administrative matters related to the DOD. Unlike an appropriations bill, this legislation does not provide budget authority for government activities. While the bulk of the bill focuses on defense-related issues, there are usually provisions pertaining to areas where DOD and VA share joint responsibility such as the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for separating servicemembers.

On September 10, the House passed its version of the NDAA (H.R. 3838) by a vote of 231 to 196. Voting occurred largely along party lines with four Republicans voting against the measure and 17 Democrats voting for it. The House adopted three amendments that may be of interest to PVA members. First, an amendment by Rep. Jen Kiggans (R-VA) requires DOD to provide timely electronic notices for TRICARE beneficiaries before coverage transitions such as a sudden health change or aging into TRICARE for Life. Another amendment

offered by Chairman of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee, Rep. Mike Bost (R-IL), directs several improvements to the TAP program with added accountability and improved pathways for service members and spouses. They are as follows:

- **Requirement of Separation Counseling** – Requires servicemembers to attend at least three days of separation counseling unless they have accepted a job offer or are enrolled in an educational or vocational training program.
- **Waiver for Certain Members of the Reserve Components** – Provides a waiver for certain members of the Reserve, allowing them to attend TAP every three years, unless there is relevant new information.
- **Pilot Program for Military Spouses** – Allows servicemembers to attend TAP multiple times and are encouraged to bring their spouses along, so they can prepare for their next phase in life together.
- **Minimum Amount of Counseling Regarding Financial Planning** – Enhances the financial planning section of TAP to cover topics such as debt management, taxes, and investing.
- **Coordination Between DOD, VA, and DOL** – Improves the warm handover process by fostering a personal connection between the VA, DOD, and the Department of Labor (DOL).
- **Yearly Surprise Audits** – Includes plans for regular audits of the TAP program, updates to the TAP curriculum, and improvements to the website where veterans and their families can find TAP resources.
- **Solid Start Program: Interaction with TAP** – Implements a review of the TAP program when servicemembers are contacted as part of the Solid Start Program, as well as additional reporting requirements to ensure veterans receive the best support for their next mission.

Finally, the third accepted amendment, which was offered by Rep. Tony Gonzales (R-TX), requires the Secretary of Defense to report to Congress on the adequacy of military commissaries and dining facilities. Lawmakers are particularly interested in knowing how



inadequacies with these services impact readiness, morale, and retention.

One amendment of great interest to the military and veteran community that was not considered by the House would have provided concurrent receipt of retirement pay and VA disability compensation to combat-injured servicemembers who were forced to medically retire before reaching 20 years of service. The text of that amendment came directly from the Major Richard Star Act (H.R. 2102) which currently has a very high level of support (303 cosponsors) in that chamber.

### OMHSP HOLDS VSO MEETING

On September 11, the Offices of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (OMHSP) held their third quarter veterans organization stakeholder partnership briefing. PVA participated in the meeting. These quarterly briefings provide the VA with an opportunity to share programmatic updates and other information with stakeholders in attendance.

The focus of this meeting was to provide updates on the REACH Vet program and the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) and hold breakout sessions where in-person attendees were able to engage in conversations with the leaders of the OMHSP and other VA staff.

The REACH Vet program (Recovery Engagement and Coordination for Health) was initially launched in 2017 as an innovative way to engage with veterans who are the most at risk of suicide. The Veterans Health Administration developed a targeted prevention program that is triggered by the predictive model which collects data from VA's electronic health record to identify the top 0.1 and 0.2 percent of the top at risk veterans. The REACH Vet program has been impactful, and VA has been able to reach out to many veterans and get them connected to mental health resources.

Another presentation focused on the VCL. The VA shared the most recent data coming from the office. Since the national launch of 988 in July 2022, the VCL has received more than 2.7 million calls, a 46 percent increase in calls per day. Since January 2025, the VCL has received 685,000 calls, chats, and texts, which marks a

15 percent increase. A positive statistic from the VCL is that 97 percent of calls were answered in 20 seconds or less, with an average speed of 9 seconds.

Lastly, we closed out the briefing with an opportunity to share candidly with the directors of the Office of Suicide Prevention and the Office of Mental Health. Both directors were open to suggestions from veterans organizations about the types of briefings that should be added in the future, and they stressed that they are available to organizations should we have any concerns.

### NEWS OF NOTE

#### DOJ Announces Settlement Agreement with Arkansas Division of Correction

On September 5, the Department of Justice (DOJ) [announced](#) that the agency has entered into a [settlement agreement](#) with the Arkansas Division of Correction (ADC) to resolve disability rights violation allegations. Among other things, inmates with mobility disabilities alleged that the facility failed to provide accessible features, regulate water temperature, and provide necessary support or supplies to physically transfer between their wheelchairs and beds, showers, and toilets. The inmates alleged that they suffered physical harm as a result of the violations. The DOJ's investigation concluded that ADC excluded qualified individuals with disabilities from the benefits of receiving adequate medical care.

Under the settlement, ADC must remedy inaccessible elements identified by the U.S. Architectural Accessibility Survey, retain an independent licensed architect, and provide adequate care and treatment for inmates with disabilities. The settlement agreement also includes quality assurances and monitoring and reporting requirements to ensure compliance.

### WEBINARS, SURVEYS, & COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES

#### Invitation: PVA Holding Access to the Skies Event

PVA and All Wheels Up are working together to reshape the future of accessible air travel – and you're invited.

**PVA.org**

@ParalyzedVeterans



Paralyzed Veterans of America



@PVA1946



@PVA1946





Join us virtually, or in person if you're in the Seattle area, on Friday, September 26 from 9:00 AM – 12:00 PM PT. To register, click [here](#). It's free!

### PVA Announces ABA Webinar Series

Join us in October, November, and December as the U.S. Access Board presents for PVA members three dynamic webinars exploring accessibility under the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA).

- October 15 at 3:00 PM ET learn the essentials of federal facility accessibility, from entrances and signage to restrooms and assembly areas ([register here](#))
- November 20 at 3:00 PM ET dive into practical guidance on making commissaries and recreation facilities accessible for all service members, retirees and their families ([register here](#))
- December 10 at 3:00 PM ET explore inclusive outdoor design standards that open trails, campsites, and beach access to everyone ([register here](#))

### Air Travel Survey Opportunity

The research teams at Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, Northwestern University, and Indiana University are conducting a research study to explore the air travel experiences of people with mobility disabilities. They want to understand the air travel challenges and things that make air travel participation better to improve airlines and airports. They will conduct focus groups to understand your experiences.

In this study you may be asked to attend one focus group in person or online.

Participants must:

- Be 18 years and older
- Live in the United States
- Self-identify with a physical disability or mobility impairment that requires physical assistance

from another person or from adaptive equipment like a wheelchair, walker, or cane

- Have flown at least twice by air in the last two years
- Communicate in English
- Have access to reliable internet connection to participate in an online focus group through smartphone, personal computer, or another device

If you would like more information about this opportunity, please contact them for screening using this link: [Share Your Experience Flying with a Physical Disability](#).

### Veterans' Committee Activities

Please visit the [House](#) and [Senate](#) Veterans' Affairs Committee webpages for information on previous and upcoming hearings and markups.