



# Washington Update

Check out the [PVAAction Force](#) page to view legislative campaigns and a list of key legislation.

## **PVA NATIONAL PRESIDENT ROBERT THOMAS, JR. TESTIFIES BEFORE CONGRESS**

On March 4, PVA National President Robert Thomas, Jr. testified before a joint session of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees regarding PVA's 2026 policy priorities. President Thomas stressed the importance of restoring VA's specialized care services, which are in dire need of adequate funding and staffing; expanding access to Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS), like the department's Veteran Directed Care program; and codifying VA's Bowel and Bladder program.

For veterans with spinal cord injuries and disorders (SCI/D), support for neurogenic bowel and bladder dysfunction is a crucial aspect of their care. Unfortunately, VA's current Bowel and Bladder program is fraught with challenges for caregivers. Timely reimbursement and the tax treatment of payments are two of the complaints most often expressed. President Thomas explained how codifying the program could fix many of its problems and urged support for the Disabled Veterans Dignity Act (S. 3647).

President Thomas also spoke about some transportation problems PVA members are experiencing when attempting to access VA care, and the growing need to raise baseline rates for special monthly compensation (SMC) and Dependency and Indemnity Compensation

(DIC). The two-panel hearing lasted nearly three hours. You can watch a recording of the hearing [here](#). President Thomas's oral statement begins at the 2:00:00 mark. His full written statement is located [here](#).

While in Washington, D.C., President Thomas and other members of PVA's Executive Committee met with 10 congressional members and the staff of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees. Members of the Executive Committee met with Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Ranking Member Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), as well as the House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Mike Bost (R-IL) and Ranking Member Mark Takano (D-CA).

During their visits, PVA leaders stressed the importance of preserving VA's specialized services; and the need to expand the department's HCBS programs, codify VA's Bowel and Bladder program, and increase rates of SMC and DIC. Members of the Executive Committee also had the chance to visit with the Ranking Member of the House Appropriations Military Construction and VA Subcommittee, Debbie Wasserman-Schultz (D-FL), and urge her to work toward restoring research funding for SCI/D in the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Program.



## **LATEST EFFORTS TO MOVE THE MAJOR RICHARD STAR ACT BLOCKED IN THE SENATE**

On March 3, Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) moved to advance the Major Richard Star Act out of the Senate. However, the motion to advance was blocked by Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI) due to its overall cost and the lack of a funding mechanism. “We can’t just come down here and talk about how much we love vets and how we want to support them,” Johnson said. “We also have to look at the reality of the situation in dollars and cents. We are \$39 trillion in debt. Over the next decade, we’ll probably go to \$60 trillion. We have to look at the dollars and cents.” PVA supports the Major Richard Star Act, which would eliminate the offset between military retirement pay and VA disability compensation for veterans who were medically retired before reaching 20 years of active service and had a disability caused by combat service.

## **BILL INTRODUCED TO ALLOW SSDI RECIPIENTS TO OPT OUT OF WAIT FOR BENEFITS**

On February 25, Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME) and Sen. Maggie Hassan (D-NH) [announced](#) the reintroduction of S. 3924, the [We Can’t Wait Act](#). The bill would allow Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) claimants to elect to receive their SSDI benefits during the usual five-month exclusion period in exchange for a small reduction in their monthly benefit. After the Social Security Administration determines whether an applicant is eligible to receive SSDI benefits, there is a mandatory five-month wait where claimants are denied payments after becoming eligible.

Thousands of SSDI claimants are forced to file bankruptcy while waiting for a decision on their SSDI application. In some cases, claimants die before ever receiving their benefits. Imposing additional exclusionary periods harms disabled veterans and individuals with disabilities. PVA supports the We Can’t Wait Act and urges advocates to send a message to their senators [here](#).

## **HVAC ASSESSES VA’S IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SENATOR ELIZABETH DOLE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY VETERANS HEALTHCARE AND BENEFITS IMPROVEMENT ACT**

On March 4, the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee (HVAC) held an Oversight and Investigations subcommittee hearing to examine how the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act, commonly called the Dole Act, has been implemented during its first year and whether it is improving support for veterans and their caregivers.

Dr. Thomas O’Toole, Acting Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Services, testified on behalf of VA and highlighted the implementation of 25 out of 72 sections in the law. He noted that remaining sections are pending announcements in the Federal Register. Subcommittee members voiced their frustration at the slow pace of implementation and lack of transparency in the process. You can watch the hearing [here](#).

## **HVAC REVIEWS HOW VA SUPPORTS VETERANS WITH TBI**

On March 5, the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee (HVAC) held a Health subcommittee hearing on “Hidden Wounds: Effectively Supporting Veterans with TBI.” The hearing examined how the VA identifies, treats, and supports veterans with TBI, often referred to as the ‘signature wound’ of the post-9/11 conflict.

Subcommittee members received updates on VA’s current clinical programs, data systems, and research infrastructure. The purpose of the hearing was to make sure each of these areas is adequately meeting veterans’ long-term needs. You can watch the hearing [here](#).

## **VA ANNOUNCES FIRST STEPS IN PARTIAL CLAIM PROGRAM TO AVOID FORECLOSURE**

Last year, PVA supported the VA Home Loan Program Reform Act (P.L. 119-31), that created a partial claim program (PCP) within the VA Home Loan Guarantee program. A “partial claim” is intended to provide relief for veterans who fall behind on their mortgage and

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hopefully keep them in their homes. Unlike other federally backed mortgage products, the VA Home Loan has never had a PCP, which came to a head two years ago in a series of NPR articles highlighting the increasing number of veteran foreclosures.

The bill became law last July, and VA is now in the development phase of implementing VA's first PCP. VA has shared their draft language with stakeholders to gather feedback on the impact of their proposal and to ensure the plan will truly help veterans. PVA worked with veterans organizations, industry professionals, and other stakeholders in reviewing the draft PCP language. We are hopeful the VA will consider the feedback received and make any needed adjustments to the program.

#### **PVA AND U2FP: PARTNERING TO PROTECT AND ADVANCE SCI RESEARCH**

PVA regularly partners with organizations on issues that affect our members. One key partner is Unite 2 Fight Paralysis (U2FP), a nonprofit founded in 2005 that brings the spinal cord injury (SCI) community together to advance research, advocacy, and education aimed at curing paralysis.

Last year, U2FP organized a coalition that included PVA and other SCI organizations to respond to a sudden cut in SCI funding from the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Program. That coalition's advocacy helped restore much of the SCI-related research funding for fiscal year 2026.

In mid-February, U2FP held its 20th Annual Science and Advocacy event in Washington, D.C. The three-day event included:

- two days of briefings and panels for people with SCI, family members, scientists, clinicians, biotech representatives, and advocates to learn about the latest SCI care and research, and
- one day of Hill visits, when more than 100 advocates met with staff from more than 50 congressional offices to press for increased federal funding for SCI research.

PVA was proud to support and participate in the event. We attended briefings and helped prepare advocates for their meetings on the Hill—work that is critical as we push for continued investment in SCI research.

#### **NEWS OF NOTE**

##### **Yes, You Can Version Five Goes Live**

For the past four decades, *Yes, You Can!* has been an invaluable resource for newly injured and/or diagnosed veterans with spinal cord injuries and disorders (SCI/D). PVA has long partnered with the VA to make sure this resource is available across the VA SCI/D system of care. After years of updates and review, the fifth version is live on [PVA's website](#).

##### **Workforce Pell Regulations Posted on the Federal Register**

In December and January, PVA staff participated in a negotiated rulemaking with the Department of Education to establish the regulatory text for an expansion of the Pell Grant Program to include workforce programs. An eligible workforce program is intended to be a "high-quality, performance-based, short-term program" that supports America's workforce needs. The language proposed by negotiators is now available on the Federal Register where it will be up for public comments. The proposed regulation is available [here](#).

#### **WEBINARS AND COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES**

##### **FINAL REMINDER—Webinar: Accessibility of Federal Facilities—An Overview of the ABA**

Join us on March 19 at 2:00 p.m. ET as we explore accessibility under the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA). Travis Saner, Accessibility Specialist, U.S. Access Board will discuss the essentials of federal facility accessibility under the ABA, from entrances and signage to restrooms and assembly areas.

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To register, please click [here](#).

### **Veterans' Committee Activities**

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

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