



# Washington Update

*Recent news regarding legislation and regulatory actions affecting veterans and people with disabilities.*

Written and produced by Paralyzed Veterans of America - Government Relations Department

April 16, 2021

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**Want to Follow the Status of Priority Issues Between Updates?**  
Visit [PVA's VoterVoice Portal](#) to view our latest alerts and a list of key legislation and its status.

## **HVAC, SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY HOLDS LEGISLATIVE HEARING**

On April 14, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity held a hearing on 16 pieces of legislation. Maureen Elias, Associate Legislative Director, testified on behalf of PVA. The main focus of PVA's testimony was a draft bill that would provide a new automobile allowance for eligible service-connected veterans every ten years, as well as provide a small grant for eligible veterans enrolled in VA health care with non-service-connected qualifying conditions to purchase an adapted vehicle. The auto grant provision in the draft bill related to service-connected veterans mirrors the language in the AUTO for Veterans Act (H.R. 1361/S. 444), which is a top priority for PVA. The draft bill would also place into statute the provision of ingress/egress by VA for non-service-connected veterans enrolled in VA health care and open eligibility for these veterans to the adaptations available through the Automotive Adaptive Equipment program. Other bills focused on improvements to benefits for homeless veterans; fixes to VA education services, including codifying some protections that were put in place during COVID for future disasters; removal of delimiting dates and a requirement for in-state tuition for those using Chapter 35 benefits, as well as protections overseeing implementation of the "Digital GI Bill;" and establishment of a fourth VA Administration to handle the economic opportunity benefits currently under the purview of the Veterans Benefits Administration. You can watch the hearing [here](#).

## **BIDEN-HARRIS ADMINISTRATION RELEASES FISCAL YEAR 2022 BUDGET OUTLINE**

On April 9, the Biden-Harris Administration released a budget outline for Fiscal Year 2022. The outline does not include all the details and specifics traditionally found in the president's annual budget proposal to Congress. White House officials say a more comprehensive document will

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# Washington Update

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---

be released in the coming weeks. In the meantime, the outline gives lawmakers the top line numbers for federal agencies to allow them to start preparing the 12 annual funding bills.

Here is a snapshot of some of the funding being proposed for VA:

- Provides \$113.1 billion in total discretionary spending for VA, \$97.5 billion of which would go toward VA health care, an increase of \$7.6 billion from 2021. \$94 billion of this amount is already approved through advance appropriations.
- Calls for \$882 million for medical and prosthetic research, the largest amount in history, which is very close to the Independent Budget's recommendation of \$902 million.
- Provides \$40.3 million so VA can hire additional claims processors to handle veteran disability claims which became backlogged during the pandemic as well as the thousands of new claims expected from Vietnam War-era veterans who recently became eligible for benefits from Agent Orange-related conditions.
- Furnishes another \$4.8 billion to modernize VA IT systems and \$2.7 billion more for VA's electronic health record modernization project.

The request also contains increases for numerous programs important to people with disabilities:

- As part of the President's Equity Agenda, the Administration proposes significant increases for federal agencies' Offices of Civil Rights, and includes \$33 million in additional funds to the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division and \$85 million more for state and local fair housing organizations to combat discrimination.
- An additional 200,000 families would receive aid with a \$30.4 billion infusion into the Housing Choice Voucher program. The budget provides an increase of \$500 million in support of the HOME Investment Partnership Program to construct and rehabilitate affordable rental housing and \$180 million to the Department of Housing and Urban Development's elderly and disabled housing program would support an additional 2000 units.
- To expand opportunities for retraining and workforce development, the budget increases support for the Registered Apprenticeship system by \$100 million to a level of \$285 million; includes a six percent increase of \$3.7 billion for Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act state grant programs to enhance career opportunities for disadvantaged groups, including low-income veterans; and contains a request of \$20 million for a new program, developed in collaboration with VA, focused on helping veterans shift to careers in clean energy.
- The request builds on the American Rescue Plan with an additional \$551 million for Home and Community Based Services, doubles funding for the Lifespan Respite Care Program, and provides additional resources for programs under the Administration for Community Living within the Department of Health and Human Services.
- The Social Security Administration's administrative budget would increase by \$1.3 billion to provide better field office services, add staff to help process disability claims, and lower customer service wait times.

# Washington Update

April 16, 2021

Volume 27, Number 7

---

## STIMULUS PAYMENTS TO NON-FILERS BEGIN

In an announcement on March 30, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) said that stimulus payments to non-filer Social Security and other federal beneficiaries would be disbursed at the beginning of April with the projection that the majority of these payments would be sent electronically and received on April 7. The IRS continues to review data received for VA benefit recipients and expects to determine a payment date and provide more details soon. Currently, the IRS estimates that Economic Impact Payments for VA beneficiaries who do not regularly file tax returns could be disbursed by mid-April. VA beneficiary payment information will be available in the Get My Payment tool at a future date. Taxpayers should note that the form of payment for the third Economic Impact Payment, including for some Social Security and other federal beneficiaries, may be different than earlier stimulus payments. More people are receiving direct deposits, while those receiving payments in the mail may receive either a paper check or an EIP Card – which may be different than how they received their previous Economic Impact Payments. Details about the stimulus payments can be found on the [IRS website](#).

## SOCIAL SECURITY EXPANSION UPDATE

Supporters of legislation to improve Social Security benefits have been waiting impatiently for reintroduction of measures such as the Social Security 2100 Act and the Stop the Wait Act. The former bill has been championed in previous Congresses by the Chairman of the Ways and Means Social Security Subcommittee, Rep. John Larson (D-CT), and contains a host of benefit enhancements and provisions to shore up Social Security trust fund finances well into this century. The latter bill is authored by Rep. Lloyd Doggett, (D-TX) and seeks to lessen the economic burden on those who qualify for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) by reducing or eliminating waiting periods for disability benefits and Medicare coverage. While both sponsors intend to pursue their legislation during this Congress, a number of factors have contributed to the delay.

When the 117th Congress convened in January, the urgent need to address the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic meant that legislators' attention was almost exclusively focused on the American Rescue Plan. In addition, the Biden-Harris Administration entered office with its own ideas about programs such as Medicare and Social Security that the President had outlined in his [2020 campaign platform](#). As a consequence, negotiations are underway between the Hill and the Administration to hammer out a new Social Security 2100 Act that reflects a consensus between congressional and White House advocates. Once the agreed upon legislation is introduced, Chairman Larson plans on an extensive hearing schedule to highlight the importance of action on Social Security to address the nation's looming retirement crisis and the economic security needs of women and minority populations.

Rep. Doggett's bill, the Stop the Wait Act, is reportedly in its final drafting stages. While the new measure is expected to contain provisions eliminating the five-month waiting period for SSDI, some adjustments may be made to the Medicare sections to address cost concerns. Under discussion is a reduction in the 24-month wait for Medicare coverage for those granted SSDI to a 12-month waiting period.

# Washington Update

April 16, 2021

Volume 27, Number 7

---

Watch PVA's VoterVoice for alerts and action items related to these and other measures.

## “ROUNDING OUT” COMPROMISE REACHED

Under the GI Bill “rounding out” rule, students can round out their college schedule with non-required classes to make their course load full-time once per program, allowing them to continue to receive full-time benefits. VA planned to phase out the rule on August 1, but a compromise reached between the Department, Congress, and veterans service organizations will allow the practice to continue if students are taking classes that are part of their program of education. The following example illustrates how this applies:

A student enrolled in a program to obtain a BA in Political Science must take two courses in governments (e.g., governments of Europe, Africa, South America, or Asia) as a graduation requirement. The university offers four courses that can meet the requirement. The student took two courses and therefore does not need a third or fourth for graduation. However, if the student wants to round out, VA will support the GI Bill student in taking a third or fourth course because the course is included in the student’s program of education, even though taking the additional course(s) is not a “graduation requirement.”

PVA is pleased with the compromise which allows VA to support enhanced benefits for eligible GI Bill students while protecting them from unnecessarily using their earned GI Bill entitlement by taking unrelated courses.

## NEWS ITEMS OF NOTE

- National Disability Institute (NDI) Publishes Paper on Costs of Living with a Disability

NDI recently released a [paper](#) examining the costs of living with a disability. Researchers estimate that households containing an adult with a work-disability require, on average, 28 percent more income (or an additional \$17,690 a year for a household at the median income level) to obtain the same standard of living as a comparable household without a member with a disability.

- [Disability Rights Film “Crip Camp” Nominated for an Oscar](#)

Crip Camp chronicles the experiences of a group of young people with disabilities at a summer camp in upstate New York during the 1950s and 1960s who would become leaders in the disability rights movement of the 1970s. Among those profiled is Judy Heumann, State Department Special Advisor for Disability Rights in the Obama Administration and Assistant Secretary of Education under President Clinton. The film features her role in the sit-in at the regional office of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to compel the Carter Administration to implement the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. It is available for viewing on Netflix.

# Washington Update

April 16, 2021

Volume 27, Number 7

---

## WEBINARS/ HEARINGS/SURVEYS

- PVA Webinar: The Power of Veteran Voices: Influencing Change at the Local, State, and National Level

On **Tuesday, April 27 at 2 pm ET**, join PVA Government Relations and the Anita Bloom Women Veterans Health Committee for an overview of Assisted Reproductive Technology legislation and what is currently in play for IVF and women veterans on Capitol Hill. Hear from a panel of advocates who have used their voices and stories at the federal level, through their chapters, at the state and local level, and at their VA facility to learn how your voice can help PVA priorities become law. Additionally, you will hear about PVA's organizational efforts focused on women veterans. To register, click [here](#).

- Recent Congressional Hearings:
  - On April 14, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Technology Modernization held a hearing entitled, "Strategic Review: Evaluating Concerns About the Ongoing Implementation of the Electronic Health Record Modernization Program." To view the hearing, please click [here](#).
  - On April 15, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Health held a hearing on pending legislation. PVA submitted a statement for the record. To view the hearing, click [here](#).
- HVAC Surveys on C&P Exams and USPS Delays

The House Veterans' Affairs Committee is continuing to seek feedback from veterans on two issues. The first survey is on veterans' recent experience with the C&P exam process. You can access the survey [here](#). The second survey is on veterans who may have experienced delays in USPS services. You can access that survey [here](#).

- National Women Veteran Needs Assessment

The University of Alabama is conducting a national survey of women veterans. We encourage women veterans to take and share the survey. You can access it [here](#). **It will remain open until early June.**