Paralyzed Veterans of America

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

**PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA**

**TO THE**

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

**CONCERNING PROPOSED LEGISLATION**

**June 20, 2019**

Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Roe, and members of the Committee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit our views on the broad array of pending legislation impacting the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that is before the Committee. No group of veterans understand the full scope of 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 timely, quality care and benefits. PVA provides comment on the following bills included in today's hearing.

**H.R. 485, the "*Veterans Reimbursement for Emergency Ambulance Services Act*"**

VA is authorized to reimburse the cost of emergency transport for veterans but often denies emergency ambulance claims due to improper interpretation of its own regulations, leaving tens of thousands of veterans to pay these bills out of pocket. No eligible veteran should ever have to worry if VA is going to reimburse a transportation company for transporting them to the closest and most appropriate medical facility capable of treating their emergency. Therefore, PVA supports H.R. 485 which seeks to make reimbursement for emergency ambulance services consistent with how VA reimburses for other emergency medical services.

**H.R. 712, the "*VA Medicinal Cannabis Research Act of 2019*"**

There is a growing body of evidence that cannabinoids are effective for treating conditions like chronic pain, chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting, sleep disturbances related to obstructive sleep apnea, multiple sclerosis spasticity symptoms, and fibromyalgia. H.R. 712 directs the VA Secretary to carry out a clinical trial of the effects of cannabis on health conditions like these as well as post-traumatic stress disorder. PVA supports evidence-based alternative treatments, including research into

the efficacy of medical cannabis. A series of clinical trials on the use of medicinal cannabis would help to determine if it could provide any medical benefits for veterans.

**H.R. 2942, the *"Women's Health Transition Training Pilot Program"***

PVA supports this legislation, which would extend and expand an ongoing pilot program jointly run by VA and the US Air Force to educate transitioning servicewomen about women's health care at VA. Despite being the fastest growing cohort in our military community, many servicewomen are still unaware of the benefits and services available to them. Early indicators suggest this approach may be effective. Continuing the pilot program and expanding it to women veterans of other services should provide the Department of Defense and VA the data it needs to assess the feasibility of making this program permanent along with the prospects of offering it in an online version or using it to auto-enroll participants in VA health care.

**H.R. 3083, the "*AIR Acceleration Act*"**

PVA opposes any legislation that seeks to accelerate the comprehensive review of VA capital assets directed by the VA MISSION Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-182). The timeline established in P.L. 115-182 was carefully formulated to ensure proper assessment of VA's facilities and infrastructure, nomination of commission members, and consultation with veterans service organizations were completed prior to any official meetings by the commission. Accelerating this timeline for commission meetings as allowed under H.R. 3083 would effectively allow VA to short-circuit this process. We are concerned that such a decision would undermine the protections put in place to ensure VA's Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) process is conducted in a fair and impartial manner, and that the commission has accurate data to work with.

**Discussion Draft, the "*Ryan Kules Specially Adaptive Housing Improvement Act of 2019*"**

PVA gives its strongest endorsement to this proposed legislation which raises the number of times veterans can request specially adaptive housing grants and directs VA to prioritize Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) claims for veterans with a terminal illness. It also raises the overall amount for SAH grants to $98,492 and Special Housing Adaption (SHA) grants to $19,733, and provides a supplementary grant in case the veteran moves.

VA's specially adaptive housing grant programs help veterans with certain service-connected disabilities to live independently in a barrier-free environment by providing critical housing adaptations. Many PVA members have benefited from the SAH grant

program and the accessibility they gain through it greatly increases the quality of life for these veterans.

Annual increases for VA's specially adaptive housing grant programs are tied to the Turner Building Cost Index but these small rises do not take into account for geographical costs associated with construction. For example, the cost of an accessibility ramp for a house in western New York is far less than it would cost here in the National Capitol Region. The one-time increases for SAH and SHA benefits that this bill provides will help to accommodate some of these differences.

The bill will also increase the number of times that the grant can be accessed. Currently, veterans can access their specially adaptive housing benefit a maximum of three times up to the maximum amount of the grant. Unfortunately, there are occasions where severely disabled veterans who previously used specially adaptive housing grants to modify a home were left without assistance after their disability became worse. For example, a patient with Multiple Sclerosis who was able to ambulate with an assistance device used the specially adaptive housing grants three times to adapt two homes at different periods of his life now requires a wheelchair to move as the disease has progressed. The veteran needs to make additional modifications to his residence to accommodate the use of a wheelchair, but the current cap on use forces him to pay for these adaptations out of his own pockets. Increasing the number of times a veteran can access the benefit will help ensure veterans are able to utilize their maximum specially adaptive housing benefits.

Additionally, in cases where a veteran has exhausted all of his or her benefit, this bill would authorize VA to provide a supplementary grant to eligible veterans. This would be particularly beneficial for veterans who are in a position to relocate. If a veteran is offered a job and has to move, historically the veteran would be forced to pay for any modifications to her new residence if she has exhausted her benefit. By having a supplementary grant, these veterans would now have the ability to move to a new residence and receive monetary assistance for modifications.

Finally, since VA first established Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) as a presumptive condition in 2008, PVA has represented the majority of veterans who have claimed service connection for this disease. ALS manifests itself very quickly and it is imperative that benefits needed to enhance quality of life are approved once a veteran is diagnosed with it. Prioritizing SAH benefits for terminally ill veterans, such as those with ALS, is simply the right thing to do and we appreciate its inclusion in this legislation.

We urge Congress to pass this important legislation as quickly as possible.

**Discussion Draft, *"Improvement to Work-Study Allowance Program"***

This draft legislation would grant VA the authority to provide to educational institutions an annual amount for the school to use in paying work-study allowances to veterans enrolled at the institution. PVA supports this proposal which would increase educational opportunities for veterans pursuing non-traditional means of education to start a new career and facilitate an easier transition from the military to civilian life.

PVA would once again like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to submit our views on the legislation considered today. We look forward to working with the Committee 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 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.

### *Fiscal Year 2017*

Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of National Veterans Sports Programs & Special Events — Grant to support rehabilitation sports activities — $275,000.

## 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.