



**Paralyzed Veterans  
of America**

# 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

**June 19, 2020**

**Volume 26, Number 11**

## **SENATE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE HOLDS HEARING ON RESILIENCY OF VA'S SUPPLY CHAIN**

On June 9, Dr. Richard Stone, Executive in Charge, Veterans Health Administration (VHA) testified before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee on the resiliency of VA's supply chain.

According to Dr. Stone, VA is experiencing the same challenges with obtaining supplies like personal protective equipment as every other hospital system in the country. Unlike other health care systems, however, VA has the ability to share their supply and personnel resources between sites based on immediate health care needs.

VA is in the process of collaborating with the Department of Defense (DoD) and will transition to the Defense Medical Logistics Standard Support (DMLSS) on an enterprise-wide basis. DMLSS is an information technology system within the Defense Medical Logistics – Enterprise Solution (DML-ES) portfolio. The DML-ES portfolio provides a continuum of medical logistics support for the Defense Health Agency. DMLSS delivers an automated and integrated information system with a comprehensive range of medical material, equipment, and facilities management functions. DMLSS will replace VA's legacy system designed and developed in the 1970s.

VA is currently piloting DMLSS at the James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center in North Chicago, Illinois, and VA's initial electronic health record (EHR) deployment sites in Spokane and Seattle to analyze VA enterprise-wide application. According to Dr. Stone, moving to DMLSS will allow VA to leverage a proven system that DoD has developed, tested, implemented, and interfaced with its EHR, the same Cerner platform being deployed across VHA.

Dr. Stone also discussed establishment of Regional Readiness Centers, geographically distributed, in support of four Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) Consortia. A VISN Consortium is a partnership between multiple VISNs located in the same region of the country. Each Regional Readiness Center coupled with VHA medical facilities must be capable of maintaining a combined supply depth of 180 days. We support any efforts that will ensure

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that PVA members, VA employees, and all veterans and their caregivers have access to needed PPE supplies without needing to ration them.

## HOUSE VETERANS' COMMITTEE EXAMINES VA'S PANDEMIC RESPONSE

On June 11, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee met to review VA's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many panel members commended VA for early actions like limiting visitors to facilities with high risk populations like the SCI/D centers. Dr. Richard Stone, Executive in Charge, Veterans Health Administration said that VA hired nearly thousands of new employees during the pandemic, includes roughly 4,000 registered nurses. Much concern was expressed about VA's availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks, gloves, and gowns. Dr. Stone assured the panel that the department currently has what it needs to safely provide care.

The availability of COVID-19 testing was another area of high interest prompting several questions from committee members. At one point, Dr. Stone told the committee that VA would like to provide on demand testing for veterans and employees but its ability to do that is limited by the availability of testing materials.

In PVA's statement for the hearing record, we noted that VA has tested most of the veterans who were inpatients in its SCI/D centers and SCI/D long-term care facilities. This aggressive effort led to the early identification and treatment of those with the virus and minimized the risk of further exposure to the remainder of this extremely vulnerable population. However, we pointed out that we do not know how many veterans who are on VA's SCI/D registry but not inpatient or living in VA facilities have been tested. We also relayed our members' interest in being tested for the virus and its antibodies.

## NEWS ITEMS OF NOTE

- MilCon/VA Appropriations Subcommittee Hearing on VA's Pandemic Response

On May 28, the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies held a hearing on VA's response to the coronavirus pandemic. VA Secretary Robert Wilkie, Veterans Benefits Administration Under Secretary Paul Lawrence, VA CFO Assistant Secretary Jon Rychalski, and Veterans Affairs Health Chief Consultant to the Deputy Under Secretary Jennifer MacDonald testified. This was one of the first "hybrid hearings" held since the shelter in place orders began. Some Subcommittee members participated in person while others attended through video conference to provide oversight of the almost \$20 billion Congress has appropriated to VA in emergency funding through COVID-19 response packages. VA

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leaders were questioned about a variety of issues, including austerity measures for the use of personal protective equipment, adequate testing of veterans and VA employees, the use of hydroxychloroquine in COVID-19 positive patients, food insecurity, state-run veterans nursing homes, and telemedicine.

- VA National Cemetery Funeral Services Resume

VA [resumed regular funeral services and internments](#), including military honors June 9. Two cemeteries in Long Island, New York, are still closed as COVID-19 cases remain high. They are tentatively scheduled to resume June 22, so long as the state and local agencies approve. Services that were unable to be held during the pandemic will begin happening in July. While internments continued during the pandemic, no graveside services or military honors were allowed and burial witnesses were limited. Anyone wishing to attend services, as well as cemetery employees, will be required to wear masks.

- VA to Resume In-Person Disability Exams

Over 230,000 compensation and pension (C&P) exams were placed on hold during the pandemic. Some veterans who cancelled their appointments or whose appointments were cancelled due to COVID-19 are being reported as no shows. The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) increased the number of appointments that could be conducted through telehealth or through ACE exams so veterans' claims could proceed. VA facilities have begun phasing back in services at 20 facilities. VBA's contract medical disability examination vendors are gradually resuming in-person exams in those locations as well. This week, in Colorado, Iowa, Michigan, Nebraska, Utah, and Wyoming vendors will begin scheduling and completing pending in-person exams as soon as possible. These exams will be held according to the personal protective equipment, sanitation, and distancing requirements prescribed by VBA. Also, there will be no decision on a claim if a claimant fails to appear for an exam due to continuing concerns about exposure to the COVID-19 virus.

- Presidential Campaign Positions on Issues Impacting People with Disabilities

The American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) and the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) have reached out to both major party candidates with a survey to ascertain their positions on issues of interest to the disability community. Responses to the AAPD/NCIL survey can be found [here](#). Also, the presidential campaign of former Vice President Joe Biden recently released its [plan](#) on full participation and equality for people with disabilities.

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- Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies Launches Expanded Website

The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies has launched an expanded [website](#). On this site, you can find information about the Partnership's crisis hotline that is open 24/7 for people with disabilities and their families to use during natural or man-made disasters, information for advocates and people with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, material about the REAADl for Disasters Act and Disaster Relief Medicaid Act, and many other helpful resources.

- FEMA Announces Guidance for 2020 Hurricane Operations during the Pandemic

In preparing for the 2020 hurricane season, FEMA announced [guidance](#) for State, Local, Tribal & Territorial officials to prepare for response and recovery operations and encourage personal preparedness measures amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While this document focuses on hurricane season preparedness, most planning considerations can also be applied to any disaster operation in the COVID-19 environment, including no-notice incidents, spring flooding, and wildfire seasons, and typhoon response.

- House Holds Hearings on the Administration of Elections During a Pandemic

Several hearings concerning the administration of elections in light of the coronavirus have taken place in the last few weeks.

- On June 1, the Committee on Homeland Security held a virtual forum on “Election Security and Integrity During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” Representatives Jim Langevin (D-RI) and Lauren Underwood (D-IL) co-chaired the forum and heard testimony from two panelists: Wendy Weiser from The Brennan Center for Justice and Leigh Chapman from The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. The discussion revolved around the challenges facing voters and election officials in the 2020 election and illustrated how voting in November may look different than in previous elections. The forum is available [here](#).
- On June 3, the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties held a hearing to discuss the need to protect the right to vote during the COVID-19 pandemic. The hearing addressed measures to meet this challenge, including large-scale expansion of voting by mail, as well as the impact the health crisis and other voter suppression efforts have had on minority and historically disenfranchised communities. The hearing is available [here](#).

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- On June 11, the House Administration Subcommittee on Elections held a hearing on the effects of COVID-19 on the elections. Testimony was presented by the Secretaries of State of Alabama and Louisiana along with Rep. Marci Kapter (D-OH) and Rep. Gwen Moore (D-WI). The hearing is available [here](#).
- U.S. Department of Transportation Announces \$3.5 Million in Grants to Improve Access and Mobility for All Americans

On June 5, the U.S. Department of Transportation's (USDOT) Federal Transit Administration (FTA) announced \$3.5 million in grants for 17 projects in 16 states as part of FTA's Mobility for All Pilot Program. This program seeks to improve mobility options through employing innovative coordination of transportation strategies and building partnerships to enhance mobility and access to vital community services for older adults, individuals with disabilities, and people of low income.

Examples of projects selected to receive funding through FTA's Mobility for All Pilot Program include:

- The Flint Mass Transportation Authority will receive funding to expand its same-day, on-demand transportation program with new partner agencies and clients, specifically veterans and individuals with substance use disorders living in Flint and Genesee County's rural communities who travel long distances to health care facilities.
- The Maine Department of Transportation will receive funding for a pilot project to expand on-demand bus service in Aroostook County and the rural Presque Isle area to daily fixed-route bus service. The project will use enhanced technology to fill gaps in service and improve access and mobility for older adults and individuals with disabilities in northern Maine.

## HEARINGS, WEBINARS, AND SURVEYS

- On June 23 at 2:00 p.m. ET, PVA Government Relations will hold a webinar for chapters and PVA members with Mr. Jason Latona, Chief of VA's Specially Adaptive Housing (SAH) Program. In this webinar, attendees will learn what the SAH program entails, who is eligible and how to apply. We will also discuss how the SAH program adapted during the pandemic so it can continue to serve veterans, and how pending legislation may greatly improve the program. Mr. Latona will answer questions from participants. To register, please visit. [https://pva.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_xG9W8mTWTRGjtrCakeMrvQ](https://pva.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_xG9W8mTWTRGjtrCakeMrvQ).

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- The House Veterans' Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Health and Subcommittee on Technology and Modernization will be holding a [hearing](#) on June 23 at 1:00 p.m. ET on "VA Telehealth During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Expansion and Impact."
- As we prepare for the 30th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities on July 26, we need your help. Please complete our survey regarding the accessibility experience of people with disabilities who use wheelchairs. The survey link is available [here](#).