

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
FOR THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
CONCERNING
PENDING LEGISLATION

OCTOBER 6, 2015

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and members of the Committee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit our views on legislation pending before the Committee. We appreciate the Committee focusing on these issues that will affect veterans and their families.

S. 717, the “Community Provider Readiness Recognition Act of 2015.”

PVA supports S. 717, the “Community Provider Readiness Recognition Act of 2015.” This legislation would allow the Department of Defense (DOD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to designate certain non-department mental health care providers as knowledgeable, comfortable, and understanding of the culture of members of the armed services. It would make available a registry of those mental health providers for service members and veterans to use. Given the critical shortage of mental health

providers within the VA, community providers are often the only option. Many may be ill-equipped to provide care specific to one's military experience. By designating those culturally competent providers, VA can lessen the likelihood service members and veterans will receive poorer quality care.

S. 1676, the “Delivering Opportunities for Care and Services for Veterans Act of 2015.”

PVA supports S. 1676, the “Delivering Opportunities for Care and Services for Veterans Act of 2015.” This legislation seeks to address workforce issues inhibiting the Department of Veterans Affairs from meeting the needs of veterans in rural areas. This bill would allow for the training and hiring of desperately needed medical and behavioral health providers at VA medical facilities. It would ensure that the additional 1,500 medical residency slots authorized by the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 would not count toward the current cap put in place by the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 on Medicare-funded graduate medical education (GME) positions. Further, it would establish mental health residency programs between VA and Indian Health Services (IHS) and clarify that doctoral degrees be recognized when determining eligibility for mental health counselor positions. The veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan are the most rural veteran cohort since World War I. These men and women will continue to rely on the VA system for decades to come. This legislation will help to resource VA with critically needed providers and leadership.

S. 1754, the “Veterans Court of Appeals Support Act of 2015”

PVA in accordance with past recommendations of *The Independent Budget* supports S. 1754, the “Veterans Court of Appeals Support Act of 2015.” As pointed out in the current version of *The Independent Budget*, the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claim's (CAVA) caseload averages roughly 4,600 cases per year making it have one of the highest, if not the highest, caseloads per active judge of any federal appellate court in the country. Recognizing this challenge, in 2008 the CAVC was authorized to temporarily expand to nine judges.

We ask the Committee and Congress to enact S. 1754 to permit a permanent increase in judge appointments to keep pace with an increasing caseload that PVA believes will continue to grow as the VA backlog is reduced.

S. 1885, the “Veteran Housing Stability Act of 2015”

PVA fully supports S. 1885, the “Veteran Housing Stability Act of 2015.” PVA has continuously supported improving the housing options for homeless veterans. Veterans have made this country strong and protected our way of life. It is unfortunate that many veterans, often faced with the challenges of mental illness and substance abuse, become trapped in the ravages of homelessness.

The VA has had several successes in reducing homelessness among veterans, but there is still more that can be done. The proposed legislation will continue to improve on previous programs and also provide for some of the most at risk veterans through the provisions of Section 3’s program of intensive management interventions for veterans covered by the legislation. PVA’s greatest concern is that as has happened in the past, Congress dictates VA programs without an adequate increase in funding. While funding provisions are not included in the legislation, PVA welcomes the reporting requirements that would identify both the cost of carrying out the program, as well as an estimate of costs VA would have incurred for services had the program not existed.

In addition, PVA welcomes efforts to improve the retention of housing by veterans that were formally homeless. Preventing veterans from becoming homeless in the first place should be the overarching goal of homeless programs. In the event a veteran becomes homeless and is able to acquire new housing, it is even more critical to break the cycle of homelessness to prevent them from becoming homeless again. PVA applauds these efforts as well as the expansion of housing assistance programs outlined in Section 5.

America’s veterans are some of the most deserving citizens and it is critical that the nation demonstrate their continuing care for those who have borne the battle, especially when they suffer from homelessness.

S. 2013, the “Los Angeles Homeless Veterans Leasing Act of 2015.”

PVA supports S. 2013, the “Los Angeles Homeless Veterans Leasing Act of 2015.” This legislation would authorize the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to work with local governments and non-profits to enter into long-term lease agreements for the sole purpose of providing supportive housing to veterans. The services that must be furnished by the lease-holders include nutrition, health care, vocational training, child care and transportation. Similar leases have been used to develop housing at VA properties across the country. Los Angeles County has around 4,400 chronically homeless veterans, according to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. This is the largest population of homeless veterans in the country. Given budget shortfalls for construction, this bill will allow VA to create new housing faster than the agency could on its own by partnering with local governments and non-profits.

S. 2022

PVA supports the increase in the special pension for Medal of Honor recipients. As our most honored heroes, those who have earned this prestigious honor, deserve our greatest respect and support.

Once again, we thank you for the opportunity to submit for the record. We look forward to working with the Committee to see these proposals through to final passage. We would be happy to take any questions you have for the record.

PVA would like to thank you again for the opportunity to testify on the proposed legislation. We hope that the Committee will give these bills swift consideration and move them forward for consideration in the full Senate. We would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.