

LEGISLATIVE CHATS

EPISODE 1: LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

00:03

Well hello, and welcome to PVA's first podcast on our legislative priorities.

00:11

This is a new effort that we are undertaking to improve the communication with our members about the work that we are doing in Washington, DC.

00:23

To advocate for public policy priorities legislation that impacts the lives of all PVA members and moves for the goals of our organization.

00:38

My name is Heather Ansley and I am the Associate executive director for government relations at PVA national

00:46

And we are excited about having you here today to listen to some updates that we have on our accomplishments from the last session of Congress, which was the 116th Congress

01:00

And then to talk about our goals for the 117th Congress, which kicked off this month. So I'd now like to introduce Morgan brown Morgan serves as our national legislative director

01:15

Over our veterans policy program and he's going to talk with us a little bit about some of last year's priorities and some of the legislative successes that we achieved in spite of the difficult circumstances over the last

01:33

Year with the pandemic and other

01:37

Other issues that the country has has been dealing with so Morgan. Can you tell us a little bit about those successes.

Morgan Brown

01:45

Alright, well thank you, Heather.

01:47

PVA began last year with about 10 major legislative goals in mind, we wanted to continue oversight of the VA mission X implementation.

01:58

We wanted to improve access to vas long term services and supports, which includes the as newly expanded caregiver program.

02:07

We wanted to ensure access to IVF services. We wanted to improve care of women veterans. We also saw benefit improvements for catastrophically disabled veterans.

02:19

Such as increasing the automobile allowance grant and ensuring that veterans receive appropriate automotive adaptive equipment reimbursement

02:29

Addressing the transportation needs of non service connected veterans to help restore promote and preserve the highest state of health possible

02:37

And prioritizing claims for especially adaptive housing for veterans with ALS and increasing the amount and usability of the SH grant program for all catastrophically disabled veterans and finally we saw to improve benefits for surviving spouses of

02:55

So catastrophically disabled veterans by raising the amount of compensation. They were eligible to receive

03:02

And so I just wanted to give you a sampling of some of the major legislation we help past and these include HR 3504 the Ryan Kuhls and Paul Benne specially adaptive housing improvement grant of

03:18

This is one of our major legislative efforts that provided improvements to VA adaptive housing and educational assistance programs.

03:30

S.

03:31

The team veteran caregivers act required VA to formally recognized caregivers of veterans notify veterans and caregivers of clinical determinations.

03:41

Relating to the eligibility of the family caregiver program and temporarily extended benefits for veterans who are determined ineligible for the family caregiver program. And then finally, HR 7105



003:55

Of the very large omnibus bill which is namely Johnny Isaacs, and David P Roe MD Veterans Health Care and benefits improvement at the

04:08

This bill gave VA more flexibility and caring for homeless veterans during a cover public health emergency

04:14

And directed the agency to carry out retraining assistance program for unemployment veterans, among other improvements.

04:21

This latter bill really was the icing on the legislative cake, so to speak, because it came right at the end of the year and it can have many provisions that PVA and some of its VSO partners had been working on.

04:34

For a considerable amount of time. For example, it allowed VA to continue to pay benefits to veterans impacted by the pandemic and allowed them to preserve entitlements to education benefits when they're unable to complete other college courses due to the pandemic.

04:51

It modernized the service disabled veterans insurance program raised spending on Veterans training by more than 100 million and required VA to continue providing disability benefits questionnaires online.

05:05

And it also eliminated the 12 year elimination date for veterans who enrolled in the VR&E and a program after January 1 of 2013

05:14

It reduced the DIC remarriage age from 57 to 55 requires VA to ensure prosthesis for women veterans who meet

05:23

To help me their health and social needs and directed studies on VA infertility services and eliminating barriers to care.

05:33

In sum, this was a wonderful legislative package. It was a great way to end the year and the 116th Congress, but we also insured funding for continued IVF access

05:48

Which was provided in the omnibus spending package, the Congress approved in mid December.

05:53

And PVA was also heavily involved in the successful effort to include language in the fiscal year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act that added bladder cancer hyperthyroidism and parkinsonism to vas list of conditions that are presumed to be related to Agent Orange exposure.

06:13

And then finally, we were able to get bills introduced in both the House and Senate that would repeal VA's ban on providing IVF services and then expand them.

06:25

It would allow veterans to receive an Auto Grant every 10 years

06:31

And another that would make surviving spouses of veterans who died from ALS eligible to receive additional compensation, which is more commonly known as the DIC kicker.

06:42

Unfortunately, none of these bills achieve the level of support that was necessary for passage in either chamber.

06:49

But we're already working to get them enter reintroduced into the 117th Congress. So where we can we can pick up where we left off and try to advance some of them in the coming year.

user avatar

Heather Ansley

07:02

Well, thanks. Morgan. That was certainly a lot of accomplishments in a lot of legislation that was passed. And you know, I think that's a good point to note that sometimes just

07:16

Introducing a piece of legislation can get a federal agency to do something that they already have the power to do but maybe they just don't want to do it for whatever reason.

07:27

And that was the case with the Ryan Kuhls and Paul Bene legislation that Congress approved last summer. The original version of that bill that we had helped to prepare

07:39

Contain language directing VA to prioritize SHA claims for veterans that are diagnosed with ALS.

07:46

For those of you may not know ALS. If you meet the in service requirements is always service connected for veterans and at the 100% level.

007:56

And provides access to the ancillary benefits like the Specially Adapted Housing program and we are glad that VA eventually

08:04

Saw that situation and did move to begin to prioritize those claims we we know that there's still more work to be done to make sure that a

08:14

ALS veterans of particular get their housing adaptations done in a timely manner, but we are glad that VA is recognizing the need to move more quickly.

08:25

So as a result that language actually was not in the final legislation that passed, but nonetheless, we hope that it will help to move us forward in our goal, which is to make sure that ALS veterans.

08:39

Who are in particular needing the adaptations quickly are able to get them.

08:47

As soon as possible.

08:51

Of course, now that we've talked about last year's goals and some of our accomplishments

08:56

Let's take a look at some of the things that we're working on for this year and for the 117th Congress, as I mentioned, the 117th Congress began this month.

09:08

So all of the bill that were previously introduced if they didn't become law, they are no longer viable. So all of those bills have to be reintroduced

09:19

And we certainly have a lot of work ahead of us. But we believe that we have some good opportunities this year so Morgan. Can you tell us a little bit about some of the goals for the 117th Congress

Morgan Brown

09:33

Absolutely. In many cases, you're going to see that these are much like last year's goals.

09:39

And of course, one of PVA perennial efforts has to improve the health care system and it's available services. And one of the key ways that we do this is to preserve access to VA specialized services.

0009:53

Congress must preserve access to VA specialized services, including the spinal cord injury and disorder system of care and provide the funding necessary to ensure their continued success.

10:06

But lawmakers must also ensure proper staffing of VA specialized services by ensuring that the department has the authority to provide additional pay compensation retention incentives to make the VA more competitive with the private sector.

10:22

Will also be working to expand access to VA's long term services and supports.

10:28

By asking Congress to conduct oversight of VA is implementation of the expanded program of comprehensive assistance for family caregivers, otherwise known as the caregiver program to ensure that eligibility determinations are consistent and the appeals process is fair, just an expedite

10:47

Implementation of face to

10:50

As well by October 1 of this year, the lateral move would allow eligible veterans, regardless of what era, they served in to participate in the program.

11:01

Will also be asking Congress to help maintain a safe margin of Community Living Center capacity for veterans with SCI/Ds, by providing increased funding for related construction projects.

11:15

Once again will be pressing Congress to increase access to IVF beginning with a repeal on the ban of the services and make

11:24

Regular part of the medical benefits package that's available to veterans. We will also ask VA to provide additional assistance reproductive technology, including IVF surrogacy gamma donation at VA for any veteran enrolled in VA, health care.

11:44

In fact, we expect legislation addressing this particular issue to be reintroduced in the House. Any day now.

11:51

Will also be asking Congress to enhance care for women veterans with SCI/D. There's a lot more

011:59

women entering the military service in the US, there are many more women veterans in Congress must ensure the VA is

12:06

Able to fully meet the needs of women veterans with catastrophic disabilities, by considering their unique needs and developing programs and services.

12:15

targeted towards the broader women veteran population. In fact, last year PVA was able to

12:21

help raise congressional awareness of many of the challenges our members face in accessing care through regular participation in the House Veterans' Affairs Committees test for some women veterans.

12:33

Which has been reauthorized for the new Congress and we expect that task force to hit the ground running soon. And once again, we hope to make significant gains that will benefit women veterans with catastrophic disabilities.

12:48

We will continue to ask Congress to strengthen benefits for catastrophically disabled veterans.

12:53

By asking Congress again to increase the number of times eligible veterans can access the automobile allowance grant and ensure that veterans receive appropriate

13:03

reimbursement for automotive adaptive equipment.

13:07

We also want them to give VA, the authority to provide greater assistance to veterans who have non service connected injuries, so they can receive the same type of adaptive automobile equipment.

13:17

As veterans, whose disabilities or service connected. Currently, the department assist them with ingress and egress only

13:25

And our newest goal is raising the amount of funding available through VA's home improvements and structural alterations grant

13:33

To improve access to housing adaptations for all catastrophically disabled veterans.



013:39

HISA grants help veterans and servicemembers make medically necessary improvements and structural alterations to the primary residence, for example, they could be used to help

Widen entrances and make exits more accessible. They could allow access to the kitchen or bathroom, improve plumbing, or even electrical systems for medical necessary equipment.

14:03

The grant currently has a lifetime limit of \$6800 for those with service connected disabilities and \$2000 for those with non service connected disabilities.

14:13

But these rates haven't been raised 11 years and but certainly the cost of remodeling and building have so we're urging Congress to raise them to ensure this appropriate important benefit fulfills its intended purpose.

14:28

And then finally, arguably one of PVA most important efforts is to enhance benefits for surviving spouses of catastrophically disabled veterans.

14:37

Here, Congress must ensure veterans who die from ALS receive the full benefits there do

14:45

Once again will be seeking the reintroduction of the justice for ALS Veterans Act, which would allow surviving spouses to receive an additional \$284.50 cents a month in dependency and indemnity compensation of benefit is commonly referred to as the DIC kicker.

15:03

Normally spouses qualify for the enhanced benefit if the veteran was for eight years, up until the time of the death in received or was entitled to receive a total disability rating.

15:15

But because the average life expectancy for a person with ALS is two to five years, many of these spouses rarely qualify for the additional DIC benefit.

15:25

VA's policy fails to recognize the significant sacrifices these veterans and the spouses have made for this country and we will be asking Congress to extend this benefit.

15:36

To the spouses. So that's a quick overview of what we have planned right now. Heather, do you have or would you like to talk about any next steps or additional considerations.

Heather Ansley

15:49

Thanks Morgan for going over our priorities as you mentioned, there are some that are new and some that we have to come back and work on. Certainly, it can take

15:59

A long time to get legislation through Congress. So we are excited to jump in. Once again, now that we look at.

16:09

All of these priorities that we have for the year, we have to think about what the environment is on Capitol Hill and what the the obstacles are that we might face.

16:21

Of course, we have political instability, as we have seen recently a pending impeachment trial in the Senate.

16:30

House and Senate committees that have not yet held organizational meetings the control of the Senate has recently changed this with the inauguration of

16:43

Now, President Biden with Vice President Harris being the tie breaking vote in a 50/50 Senate on our Veterans' Affairs Committees.

16:55

We have a lot of new committee staff that will be working with. And of course, we have the continuing uncertainty surrounding covid-19 and continued operation in a

17:10

virtual environment and just lots of changes and challenges as we head into into this year. It looks like the IVF legislation will be coming up first.

17:22

Again, we expect the reintroduction of of one or more bills addressing this issue soon and we're currently working with committees staff and the individual

17:34

Bill sponsors to get the auto grant legislation and also the DIC kicker bill that we mentioned for ALS widows introduced as well.

17:46

We are going to need a new sponsor for the house version of the the justice for ALS Act because the previous one was not reelected.

17:55

So that's something that will be focused on. And over the past few months, we have been working with

18:01

The Veterans' Affairs Committee staff to develop legislation that's addressing the adaptive automotive

18:09

Equipment eligibility and, more recently, the discussions on the language we might want in a piece of legislation addressing the HISA grant program.

18:19

So we're hopeful that some standalone bills on both of those issues will be reintroduced sometime this year. And of course, having those bill numbers and titles is important.

18:35

So that we can then take action and let our members of Congress know about our support for them.

18:42

So one of the exciting things that PVA has done is last year we we launched our voter voice tool.

18:50

And it is a grassroots advocacy tool that really helps us to be able to connect with PVA MEMBERS, YOUR FAMILY MEMBERS, YOUR caregivers and have them weigh in with their members of Congress, the White House.

19:06

On issues that are important to PVA and it's a very efficient way to do so with a couple of clicks.

19:16

With your information you can send a personalized letter to your members of Congress, letting them know that you support a particular bill or action or maybe even oppose the particular bill or action depending on PVA's stance on the issue.

19:33

We will be focused. Of course on bills that correspond with our legislative priorities.

19:40

But there may be other things that we include as well. You'll also be able to see PVA's position on bill. And also, who in Congress is supporting those measures.

19:52

And this will give us a great opportunity to be able to try to influence the outcome of passage of that legislation.

20:02

We already had the opportunity to use it last year with the special adaptive housing bill the Ryan Khuls and Paul Bene legislation to get that over the finish line, and then I'll also once again.



20:14

With Morgan mentioned the National Defense Authorization Act and the introduction.

20:21

Of the new presumptives for Agent Orange exposures. So we think there's going to be a lot of great opportunities to check in. But in order to

20:30

participate with us. We want you to sign up. So if you go to pva.org and then go to research and resources legislation legislative priorities, you'll see a place to sign up for the

20:47

Our database for voter voice. That means when we have an action alert, when we need you to take action. We can again with a couple of clicks send out an email letting you know.

20:59

Who needs to be contacted and what the messages that can be sent will also have campaigns that are there that you can take action on yourself.

21:09

Even if it's not something that we have sent out a message on as a priority. So this is a really great way to to be active with your members of Congress, in particular.

21:23

To really help push forward PVA priorities in 2021 you will also be able to come alongside PVA members that are participating

21:35

In our advocacy week the beginning of March, we're going to ask all PVA members, family members, caregivers to join us virtually and weighing in through voter voice to try to get support for the legislation.

21:53

That we believe will help make the lives of all Paralyzed Veterans better in now in both the coming years. So we want to say thank you for

22:05

tuning in with us today. We plan to do additional podcast in the future to keep you up to date on what's happening here in Washington.

22:15

So please do share this with other PVA members other folks that you think might be interested in learning about the work that we do. And thank you for your time today. We certainly appreciate it.

