

The Wheeled Herald



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Great Plains Chapter

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Great Plains Hosted First Billiards Tournament on PVA Billiards Series

In September, we hosted our first National Billiards Tournament on the PVA Billiards Series. Participants came together from 6 different states to play at Big John's Billiards in Omaha. They competed in 9-ball matches in three flights: Main Flight, Second Flight, & MS Flight. Many of our local chapter members participated for the first time and are already talking about next year!

As PVA works to improve opportunities for its MS members, Great Plains was the first chapter to offer an MS division in billiards. We had four PVA members with MS compete in this division alongside the wheelchair division.

Congratulations to the following tournament winners:

<u>Main Flight</u>	<u>Second Flight</u>	<u>MS Flight</u>
1st: Charles Interrante	1st: John Scott	1st: Shayna Goerd
2nd: Dan Hall	2nd: Mark Linquist	2nd: Michael Warde
3rd: Chris Parnell	3rd: Will Leavitt	3rd: Bill Connor

Throughout the event, the chapter had a silent auction open with a variety of items to bid on including a pool cue, fall baskets, jewelry, and a handmade wooden flag.

We would like to give a big thanks to Woody the Ref for spending the full two days with us officiating the tournament and to Kathy Dolezal for running the skills contests each day. Special thanks to Tammy Squier for catering lunch for our Awards Luncheon during the event.



President's Message by Randy Squier



As 2024 winds down, we've had a busy year but it's not over yet. I've still got things to do. Perhaps you do, too. I'd like to thank everyone for their participation in our Chapter events so far this year.

The billiards tournament was a new event for us. Thank you to Chris Parnell as the tournament director and everyone that contributed that made this event a success. Again, we grow through these friendships and I learned that my pool game was not what I thought. These guys and gals are good and next year I'll do better.

The Chapter bowling event now as PVA's national tournament was also well attended with record numbers. As the participation level continues to grow, so grows our determination to bring quality programs to our members and those disabled in our community. These friendships are the bedrock of our organization.

The Chapter's trunk or treat extravaganza is our next event. The little spooks and goblins will be out in force. It will be a great evening for all.

How about a cornhole event, yes I said cornhole! Our chapter is planning its first cornhole event with a clinic on November 8th and a tournament on November 9th. That one's gonna be fun - come and join us!

There is more information on this event on pages 9 & 10 of this newsletter.

As with any of our events we seek the participation from our members. We are so very fortunate to have a good spirited supportive team of individuals who give of themselves for the best end results for all. I'm pretty proud to be a part of all that you have helped us accomplish. Thanks to you all. With Veterans Day approaching please find a moment to remember those who have served, and those that have gone ahead...I salute you...

Chapter Officers

Randy Squier, President
John Scott, Vice President
Will Leavitt, Secretary
Seth Kotouc, Treasurer

Chapter Directors

Dave Nelson, Director
Tom Timmerman, Director
Shayna Goerdt, Director

Immediate Past President

Mark Linquist

National Director

Dave Nelson

National Service Officer

Mike Sheets
402-420-4017
MikeS@pva.org
LisaN@pva.org

Executive Director

Mary Bushman
bushman@greatplainspva.org

Government Relations Director

Amanda Vazquez
vazquez@greatplainspva.org

Sports Director

Patrick Reynolds
reynolds@greatplainspva.org

Congratulations to our Board of Directors for FY 2024-2025

Great Plains PVA members cast their ballots and re-elected our three directors to another 1 year term. Congratulations to Dave Nelson, Tom Timmerman, and Shayna Goerdt on their re-election!

Your Board of Directors for 2024-2025 is:

President Randy Squier
Vice President John Scott
Secretary Will Leavitt
Treasurer Seth Kotouc
Director Dave Nelson
Director Tom Timmerman
Director Shayna Goerdt
Immediate Past President Mark Linquist

Thank you to these eight members for continuing to lead our chapter!



Join PVAction Force to keep up-to-date on legislation that impacts veterans and people with disabilities, and easily communicate with your Senators and Representatives about these issues.

Executive Director's Report

By Mary Bushman

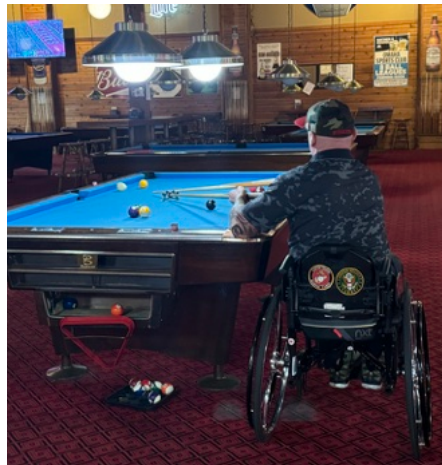
Dear Members,

Last month the chapter hosted its first 9-Ball Tournament on the PVA Billiards Series. The 2-day event was held at Big John's Billiards in Omaha and gave local players a chance to compete with experienced wheelchair poolplayers from across the country. Special thanks to Tournament Director and Great Plains PVA member Chris Parnell for guiding us through the many details involved in organizing a sanctioned billiards tournament. Thank you also to the National Wheelchair Poolplayers Association (NWPA) for their assistance with regulations and scoring. Great Plains is proud to be the first chapter on the PVA Billiards Series to include an MS Standup Division in its tournament. Four Great Plains PVA members with MS played in the September tournament and took home over \$2400 in combined cash and prizes.

Our chapter is taking the lead to promote opportunities for MS veterans to compete in PVA sponsored sports and recreation programs. The billiards tournament is the second time the chapter has expanded its tournaments to include PVA's MS veterans. This past June, the chapter introduced an MS Standup Division into the PVA Bowling Series National Tournament it hosted in Omaha. This was also the first time an MS Division was included in a PVA bowling event.

On November 8th and 9th, Great Plains PVA will host a free adapted Cornhole Clinic and Tournament at the chapter building. The tournament will have three divisions: a seated division, a standup division to include individuals with MS, and an adapted distance mixed division for seated and standup players.

Great Plains PVA is committed to providing sports and recreation opportunities for its MS members. If you are a member with MS and would like more information about the Chapter's bowling or billiards programs, please reach out to the chapter office at 402-398-1422.



2024 PVA Healthcare Summit

by Shayna Goerd, MS & Women Veterans Lead

To kick off the 2024 PVA Healthcare Summit + Expo, Dr. David Putrino presented a keynote address highlighting advancement in Implanted Brain Computer Interfaces (BCI). Dr. Putrino approaches the neurological limitation of his patients as an opportunity to challenge convention in order to advance medical care and quality of life through highly innovative technology.

Dr. Putrino assisted a paralyzed veteran who was struggling with loss of autonomy and loss of ability to participate in activities he had once enjoyed, most importantly playing video games. Dr. Putrino and his team developed the BCI technologies and methods of implementation to allow this individual to not only play games, but found an outlet for adaptive game competitions through Logitech. A documentary was released on HBO which follows the success of the team, Quad Gods.

Dr. Putrino's presentation set a tone of innovation, progress, and patient-centered care for the event, which was generally provided for healthcare workers and their teams.

Each morning started with a keynote address and was followed by separating into three tracks: Spinal Cord Injury (SCI), Multiple Sclerosis (MS), and Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS).

As a member of the PVA MS Committee, I attended as many of the MS related sessions as possible. In these sessions, doctors, researchers, and other care providers of all types presented their work. Some were focused on things they have learned about MS and its symptoms and treatments and how to leverage what we already know to more effectively treat the disease. One common theme was the discovery that treating MS with highly effective Disease Modifying Treatments (DMTs) earlier in the disease appears to slow the progression of the more disabling symptoms. Previously, an escalation from less effective to more effective DMTs was the recommendation since the highly effective DMTs come with greater risks. The trend is changing with more doctors willing to accept some healthcare risks in order to postpone as much disease progression as possible.

Other sessions were focused on progression of research and future areas of research. One area that has progressed with research is comparing MRI strengths and methods. Currently, brain MRIs are the standard with the addition of cervical spine (neck area) MRIs being added when indicated. The MS panelists and researchers noted a likelihood of thoracic spinal cord (mid section of the back) involvement as well and suggested cervical and thoracic spinal cord MRIs accompany brain MRIs at initial diagnosis with routine repetition for comparison. In relation to MRIs, the MS specialists had a preference for a certain strength of MRI when comparing images for disease progression.

This leads me to the third major focus of the summit. Care professionals across all fields presented "best practices" for how to make the care experience the best it can be for the patients they all serve. Related to the previously mentioned ideal MRI strength, the neurologists noted it's better to have scans consistently at the same strength of MRI than it is to try to get the ideal strength without consistency. This is important when considering where the patient lives and regular access to care. Having consistently "good" MRIs is better than going back and forth between "good" and "great" MRIs as the inconsistent imaging strength makes it difficult to compare images over time, which is the whole purpose of routine MRIs for MS. The phrase, "Meet the veteran where they are," came up more than once as the providers recognized the distance some may need to travel for optimal equipment, while they may have acceptable equipment much closer to home. If the veteran is routinely able to access good equipment in their area, providers don't need to push their patients to attend appointments at large hospitals farther away as this puts a strain on the veteran unnecessarily.

PVA Summit continued...

Moving on with the theme of convenience for patients, the MS Centers of Excellence (CoEs) had a lively discussion regarding their coordinated system of care. Currently, the veteran has nearly a full day of appointments in order to see all specialties related to their care when attending an MS CoE appointment. The providers noted the day is exhausting for the patients, but it was purported to be better than the patient needing to attend four or five individual appointments scheduled on different days. That said, the providers brainstormed ways to make those long days more manageable for their patients by working with food services in advance to be able to offer snacks or meals, be mindful that the patient may need breaks, or even a bed for rest between appointments.

It was wonderful to attend this event focused more on supporting and informing clinicians. I expected to primarily be a fly on the wall, but I was pleasantly surprised with how open all of the presenters and panelists were to questions and welcomed perspectives from our PVA MS Committee members. All in all, the event was deeply informative and collaborative.



Great Plains PVA Presents VA Nurse of the Quarter Award

Great Plains President Randy Squier, Vice President John Scott, and Secretary Will Leavitt had the pleasure of presenting the VA Nurse of the Quarter Award to this quarter's recipient: Norrie-Leen Ragland. Ms. Ragland is recognized for providing outstanding care to our Veterans as the Nurse Case manager in the VA's Geriatrics clinic. She has been called "an energetic catalyst of continual improvement for the Geriatrics Clinic" and a valuable member of the VA's healthcare team. Great Plains PVA was proud to honor Ms. Ragland with a certificate and pin that she can proudly wear on her badge. Thank you to VA staff for helping coordinate this program, and for the supervising staff for submitting the nomination. There are many nurses worthy of being recognized, and we are grateful to be able to show our appreciation to those who go above and beyond their duties caring for veterans.



TRUNK OR TREAT HALLOWEEN PARTY

This is a free event for individuals with special needs and their families!



26
OCT

6-7:30
PM

Paralyzed Veterans of America Parking Lot
7612 Maple Street

If you would like to reserve a parking spot and decorate a trunk this year, please contact Mary Bushman at bushman@greatplainspva.org.

Trunk sponsors are welcome to provide games at their vehicles if interested. Please bring candy or small toys to pass out at your vehicle.

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Veterans can
get an iBOT®
through their
local VA!**



**Discuss the
iBOT® at your
next mobility
consultation at
the VA!**

**To learn more about the iBOT® scan the QR code
Or call us at **1-833-346-4268****

Please mention you saw this in your local PVA Chapter's Newsletter

info@mobiusmobility.com mobiusmobility.com **1-833-346-4268**

UPCOMING EVENTS



**Bowling
Fall League**

Wednesdays @
1:00pm at
Mockingbird Lanes



**General
Membership
Meeting w/ Dinner**

8/27 @ 6:00pm
at Great Plains
PVA



**Omaha Power
Soccer Club
practices begin**

8/27 @ 6-8pm
at Great Plains
PVA



**9-Ball Billiards
Tournament**

Sept 20-21
at Big John's
Billiards



Trunk or Treat

Saturday,
October 26th
6-7:30pm at
Great Plains PVA



**Cornhole
Clinic**

Nov 8th: 5-8pm
Tournament
Nov 9th:
11am -4pm



Veterans Day
November 11th

**THANK YOU FOR
YOUR SERVICE!**



Christmas Party
December 6th
6-8pm at
Great Plains PVA
Join us for dinner
& games!





ADAPTED CORNHOLE

CLINIC & TOURNAMENT

NO ENTRY FEE

CLINIC
NOV 8
5-8PM

TOURNAMENT
NOV 9
11-4PM

3 DIVISIONS
SEATED
STANDING
ADAPTED MIXED



**PRIZES WILL BE
AWARDED IN ALL
3 DIVISIONS!**

**COMPLETE & RETURN
THE ATTACHED ENTRY
FORM TO REGISTER
FOR THE EVENT.**

LOCATION:
GREAT PLAINS PVA
7612 MAPLE ST.
OMAHA



www.greatplainspva.org



402-398-1422



**Great Plains PVA Adapted Cornhole
Clinic & Tournament
November 8-9, 2024
Great Plains PVA
7612 Maple St. Omaha, NE 68134**



Please check if you will attend the clinic, tournament or both.

Friday
Cornhole Clinic **5-8pm** _____
Dinner provided

Saturday
Cornhole Tournament **11am-4pm** _____
Lunch provided

Please Print:

Name _____ Phone# _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Email _____ Birthdate _____

Are you a veteran? ___ Yes ___ No Branch of Service _____

Check those that apply: SCI/D ___ MS ___ Amputee ___ Other (describe) _____

CHECK DIVISION ENTERING: Seated ___ Standing ___ Mixed Adapted (Distance) _____

I hereby release and hold harmless the Paralyzed Veterans of America Great Plains Chapter, its officers, directors, employees, volunteers, partners, and affiliates from all liability for personal injury and property damage which I, or my child, may suffer by participating in Great Plains PVA's Adapted Sports & Recreation Program. I give permission for the free use of my, or my child's, name and/or picture in any form of print, social, or electronic media of Paralyzed Veterans of America Great Plains Chapter and its Adapted Sports & Recreation Program.

In case of medical emergency, I give my permission for Paralyzed Veterans of America Great Plains Chapter to arrange for transportation for me, or my child, to the nearest medical facility to receive treatment.

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

If under 18, Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: _____

Return Entry Form
by email: vazquez@greatplainspva.org
or mail: Great Plains PVA, 7612 Maple Street, Omaha, NE 68134

Questions?
Contact Great Plains PVA at 402-398-1422 or vazquez@greatplainspva.org



2024 Veterans Day Poster and Poem Contest

Paralyzed Veterans of America Great Plains Chapter is pleased to announce the 2024 Veterans Day Poster and Poem Contest. Our goal is to provide an opportunity for children to creatively express gratitude for our nation's heroes in their own imaginative way.

The theme for this year's contest is: *"#AccessibilityForAll."* Students should draw a poster or write a poem that shows or tells how our nation is still inaccessible for millions of Americans. PVA will not stop until there is accessibility for everyone- moms, dads, teachers, neighbors, and of course, our veterans. *Posters must include the visual/image of a wheelchair, and poems must reference how each of us have a role to play in ensuring accessibility for all.*

Winners will be awarded a \$25 Target gift card and a feature in Paralyzed Veterans of America Great Plains Chapter's newsletter and website.

The poster contest is open to students in first through fourth grades.

The poem contest is open to students in fifth through eighth grades.

Public, private, and home-schooled students living in the United States in first through eighth grades are eligible to enter. Civic organizations, scout troops and religious organizations that work with children may also submit entries.

All entries for the Veterans Day Poster and Poem Contest must be received by Friday, October 25, 2024 via email at vazquez@greatplainspva.org or standard mail: Great Plains PVA, 7612 Maple Street, Omaha, NE 68134.

Prize winners will be determined by Paralyzed Veterans of America chapter members.

Winners in both the poster and poem categories will be announced on Monday, November 11, 2024.

Please spread the word about our Veterans Day Poster and Poem Contest to any Boy and Girl Scout troops, Boys and Girls Clubs, church groups, families, friends and others who may be interested in participating.

Complete contest rules and submission guidelines are available at www.greatplainspva.org.

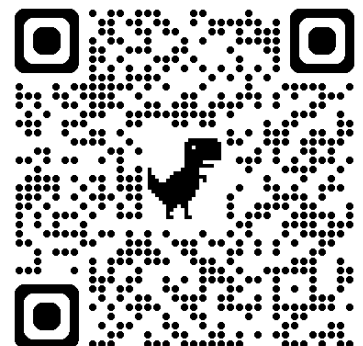


**POSTER + POEM
Contest 2024**



Scan the QR code to the right or visit our website to view the contest rules and download the entry form.

<https://www.greatplainspva.org/site/>



by Patrick Reynolds, Sports Director

2024 WheelWod Games

This was the first year Crossfit HQ gave its support to make WheelWod the definitive adaptive fitness competition, and as a result, the number of athletes that were invited to the WheelWod Games more than doubled. It was the biggest event yet, however, it was also the fewest scored events they've had at the Games in at least the last 5 years. There were also noticeable mistakes made in judging and test design that made the weekend a little disappointing.

Daniel ended his 2024 adaptive Crossfit season as the 4th fittest neuro athlete in the world. The first event was a row/ski/Echo bike chipper that was the best test of the weekend. The next 6 events were all very short in duration and not great tests of fitness in my opinion. Given that, I thought Daniel did a great job with all that he was asked to do and he's already back to work for next year. Four months until the 2025 Crossfit Open!

July Challenge Format and Leaderboard

The July Challenge was a straight-forward chipper that Ethan blitzed through on his way to another monthly challenge win. This was a fun one that we'll probably re-visit sometime in the future. Below are the formats and leaderboard:

- **Format**

- Seated/One-Arm Rowers
 - 25 medball cleans from the blocks
 - 50 dips
 - 600 meter row
- Seated/Two-Arm Rowers
 - 25 slamballs
 - 50 dips
 - 700 meter row
- Standing
 - 25 slamballs
 - 50 hand-release pushups
 - 1,000 meter row

- **Leaderboard**

- 1. Ethan Eckelbarger – 7:19
- 2. Travis Hasenkamp – 8:00
- 3. Daniel Schmitt – 8:09
- 4. Chris Parnell – 8:55
- 5. Barry Ridout - 9:15
- 6. Bruce Froendt – 11:15

Below: Daniel competes in Event 3 during the WheelWod games.



August Challenge Format and Leaderboard

August was a long couplet of biking and pulling a sled that turned out to be a pretty good test. Travis improved greatly on his second try and took the victory by over a minute. Below are the formats and leaderboard for the August Challenge:

- **Format**

- Seated
 - 6 Rounds for Time; 35 Minute Cap:
 - 800 Meter Handbike
 - 128' Backwards Sled Drag
- Standing
 - 6 Rounds for Time; 35 Minute Cap:
 - 1,500 Meter Echo Bike
 - 64' Backwards Sled Drag
 - 64' Hand-Over-Hand Sled Pull

- **Leaderboard**

- 1. Travis Hasenkamp – 22:30
- 2. Ethan Eckelbarger – 23:34
- 3. Chris Parnell – 23:51
- 4. Daniel Schmitt – 27:43
- 5. Barry Ridout – 28:39

- 6. Bruce Froendt – 29:48
- 7. Tim Hobbs – 33:35

September Challenge Format and Leaderboard

September looks like a lot on the white board, but it really was 75 shoulder to overhead for time with some pulling and burpee distractions intermixed. Barry crushed this test for his first challenge victory of 2024! Below is the format and the leaderboard for the September Challenge:

• Format

- 4 Rounds for Time:
 - Round 1,
 - 10 Shoulder to Overhead
 - 4 High Rope Pulls or 16 Pulldowns
 - 10 Medball Cleans or Barbell Hang Cleans
 - 40 Knee/Chair Burpees or 20 Burpees
 - Round 2,
 - 15 Shoulder to Overhead
 - 8 High Rope Pulls or 32 Pulldowns
 - 15 Medball Cleans or Barbell Hang Cleans
 - Round 3,
 - 20 Shoulder to Overhead
 - 12 High Rope Pulls or 48 Pulldowns
 - Round 4,
 - 25 Shoulder to Overhead

• Leaderboard

- 1. Barry Ridout – 10:44
- 2. Bruce Froendt – 11:42
- 3. Ethan Eckelbarger/Tim Hobbs – 12:19
- 5. Daniel Schmitt – 13:02
- 6. Chris Parnell – 13:51
- 7. Travis Hasenkamp – 14:41



October Challenge and 2024 Team Competition

I liked the first test from the 2024 WheelWod games so much, I decided everyone here should do it too (with revisions). This is a chipper of three machines that should be 12-ish minutes of cardio/local muscular endurance fun! Also, I'm planning on starting the team competition on Monday, October 28th so there won't be a November Challenge this year. Below are the formats of the October Challenge:

• Format

- Seated One-Arm Rowers
 - For Time:
 - 500 Meter Row
 - 700 Meter Ski
 - 1,200 Meter Handbike
- Seated Two-Arm Rowers
 - For Time:
 - 600 Meter Row
 - 800 Meter Ski
 - 1,440 Meter Handbike
- Standing
 - For Time:
 - 1,000 Meter Row
 - 1,000 Meter Ski
 - 50 Calorie Echo Bike

Upcoming Events

October

- 10th: BOD Meeting 1:00pm
- 26th: Great Plains PVA Trunk or Treat 6:00-7:30pm

November

- 8th-9th: Adapted Cornhole Clinic & Tournament
- 11th: Veterans Day - *Thank you for your service!*
Poster & Poem Contest Winners Announced
- 14th: BOD Meeting 1:00pm
Volunteer Appreciation Night 6:00-9:00pm
- 28th: Happy Thanksgiving!

December

- 6th: Chapter Christmas Party 6:00pm
- 12th: BOD Meeting 1:00pm
- 25th: Merry Christmas!
- 31st: New Year's Eve

Poker games held every Thursday (except BOD meeting days) at the Chapter building at 12pm.

CHAPTER BIRTHDAYS

September

Dianna Schnabel * Jabari Wright * William Leavitt * Christopher Parnell * James Neal *
Carl Schaffner * Charles Howard * Larry Dawson * John Speck * Gale Hendricksen *
Dennis Mitchell * Tedd Johnson * John McDonald

October

Stephanie Bushman * Gregory Minow * Frank Hussman * Michael Killin * Kevin Garner *
Grant Rhoades * Richard Arab * Richard Eisenhardt * Stephen Whitmore * Byron Coghlan *
John Slobodnik

November

Andrea Banicki * Travis Sterns * Kelly Wubbels * Gregory Peterson * Patrick Fraenza *
John Scott * Lenora Kenwolf * Matthew McCullor * Mark Linquist * Robert Compton *
Ruth Pike * Leanne Irsik * Alan Mann * Tommy Hefley * Jackie Denker * James Moran



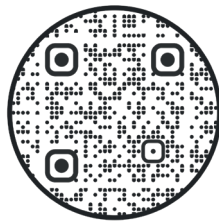
Ekso Indego® Gets Veterans Walking Again

Eligible veterans can receive an Ekso Indego exoskeleton at NO COST!

Ekso Indego Personal

What is the Ekso Indego?

Ekso Indego is an FDA-cleared, powered exoskeleton worn around the waist and legs that enables individuals paralyzed from spinal cord injuries (level T3-L5) to stand and walk, offering a new level of independence.



Scan with your phone for more information on how you could receive your own Ekso Indego Personal.

Getting Veterans with SCI Back on Their Feet

A recently revised VA policy allows Ekso Indego to be issued to qualified veterans at no cost.*

- Regain your independence
- Improve your cardio & bone density
- Enjoy eye-level conversations again



Contact us to find out if you are eligible to receive an Ekso Indego at NO COST!

www.eksobionics.com/request-information/

* A screening process through the VA is required to determine eligibility for use of the Ekso Indego Personal device. For full indications for use, visit: www.eksobionics.com/indications-for-use/

PN: 044-028-001 Rev. A



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Washington Update

Check out the [PVAAction Force](#) page to view alerts and a list of key legislation.

IMPORTANT VA FUNDING UPDATES FOR VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Earlier this year, the VA informed Congress that the department needed an additional \$2.9 billion in funding to pay veterans' pension and disability benefits for fiscal year (FY) 2024, which ends on September 30. VA also requested an extra \$12 billion in order to provide medical care for veterans and support their caregivers in FY 2025.

In light of significant advocacy from the veterans community, including from our own PVAAction Force advocates, Congress approved, and the President has signed, H.R. 9468, the Veterans Benefits Continuity and Accountability Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2024. This legislation provides the additional funding needed for VA to pay critical benefits for an estimated seven million veterans, their families, and survivors on October 1.

Before leaving town last week, Congress also approved a continuing resolution (CR) which, with just a couple of exceptions, maintains the government's current spending levels through December 20. Despite the Administration's request, the CR offers no additional cash for the Veterans Health Administration. Lawmakers wanted more time to determine the cause of the deficit, as well as where the needed funds would come from due to caps on federal spending. However, it does allow

the department to spend the \$142 billion it received through advanced appropriations faster, to ensure it can meet veteran's healthcare needs.

SVAC HOLDS HEARING ON VA BUDGET SHORTFALL

On September 18, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee (SVAC) [held a hearing](#) addressing current and future VA budget challenges. This hearing followed a similar hearing in the House Veterans' Affairs Committee earlier in the month. As in the House hearing, the Under Secretary for Health (USH) Dr. Shereef Elnahal and Under Secretary for Benefits (USB) Josh Jacobs testified on behalf of the VA.

Senators on the committee pushed for answers as to why the VA is experiencing such a drastic budget shortfall, especially in light of significant pressure from Senate appropriators encouraging the VA to request more funding. The department defended their initial budget requests claiming they were accurate but that rising enrollment and benefits authorized by the PACT Act were the culprit for increased costs. Both the USB and USH stood by VA's decision to eliminate the additional eligibility cohorts, which were spaced out in two-year windows over the next 10 years and authorized in the PACT Act, instead allowing those eligible veterans to enroll in VA this year.

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Paralyzed Veterans of America

@PVA1946

@PVA1946



Another topic discussed by multiple senators were the improper authorizations of critical skills incentive (CSI) payments, which the Office of Inspector General [published a report](#) on in May of this year. Senators from both sides of the aisle fired off aggressive questions for VA leadership about the CSI payments, the budget shortfall, and budget mismanagement by the VA.

PVA LEGISLATIVE PRIORITY CLEARS THE HOUSE

On September 17, several pieces of veteran-focused legislation were passed out of the House. A few of the bills are of direct interest to PVA members. One of the bills, H.R. 777, the Veterans' Compensation Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) Act of 2024, would increase compensation rates for veterans with service-connected disabilities, the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for survivors, and other related benefits. The COLA would match any increase in Social Security benefits.

Another bill, H.R. 6324, the Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, Veterans Affairs Major Medical Facility Authorization Act, would authorize the VA to carry out major medical facility projects during FY 2024 and the maximum amounts that can be spent on each project. \$3.3 billion was already appropriated to fund major construction across VA, including \$3.12 million for the new SCI/D building in San Diego and other facility improvements such as seismic corrections. However, the funding has to be authorized before it can be expended.

Finally, H.R. 7342, the Veterans Accessibility Advisory Committee Act of 2024, was also voted out of the House. This bill would create a Federal Advisory Committee dedicated to accessibility across the VA system and would ensure that several veterans service organizations have a seat at the table when analyzing the disparities and barriers faced by disabled veterans. This bill was a top priority during PVA's Advocacy Legislation Seminar in June. The bill is now in the Senate and we encourage folks to reach out to their senators and urge them to [support it](#) on PVAction Force.

SENATE OPTS FOR INFORMAL CONFERENCE WITH THE HOUSE TO FINALIZE THE NDAA

With limited options and time running out, the Senate opted not to vote on the Senate Armed Services Committee's version of the fiscal year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) this year. Instead, they took their bill and a small package of amendments that the chamber could agree on and went straight to an informal conference with the House. The move allows the two chambers to meet informally and work out most of the details of a compromise bill prior to the election. If they are successful, only a handful of tougher issues would have to be formally negotiated when everyone returns in mid-November.

Unfortunately, few veterans-related issues were accepted into the amendment package. The ones that were included would direct VA to create a toll-free helpline to provide information on VA benefits and services to veterans and their families; only allow licensed health care professionals to perform medical disability exams; and make spouses eligible for the disabled veterans' outreach program. A fourth provision directs the VA to report to Congress on the status and timeline of the VA Airborne Hazards & Open Burn Pit Registry 2.0.

PVA had hoped the chamber would consider adding amendments that would allow combat injured veterans to receive their full military retirement pay and VA disability compensation without offset (Richard Star Act), and future surviving spouses of veterans who pass from ALS to receive the "Dependency and Indemnity Compensation Kicker" (Justice for ALS Veterans Act). A third, and arguably more important provision that was extracted from the Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act would raise the cap on how much the VA can pay for the cost of home care from 65 percent of the cost of nursing home care to 100 percent. While the NDAA is not the normal vehicle to advance provisions like these, we greatly appreciate Senators Crapo, Coons, and Moran's efforts (respectively) to try and insert them in the bill.

Fortunately, the individual measures for each of these issues remain active until the end of this Congress, so we will continue our efforts to get them passed as stand-

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alone measures or as part of another piece of advancing legislation.

DAMA SUBCOMMITTEE HOLDS OVERSIGHT HEARING ON CONTRACTED MEDICAL EXAMINATIONS

On September 18, the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs (DAMA) Subcommittee for the House Veterans' Affairs Committee held an oversight hearing evaluating the contracted examiners used by the VA to conduct the Compensation and Pension (C&P) examinations for the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). Representatives from VA, the Government Accountability Office, and the VFW were present and provided in-person testimony. PVA provided a statement for the record which you can read [here](#).

Over 90 percent of disability compensation exams are now performed by contracted exam vendors. It is VA's job to implement contract requirements and processes to ensure that contractors are appropriately scheduling veterans for exams, and that veterans are not being forced to attend the same exam more than once. Some of the issues that were repeatedly addressed were distances traveled by veterans to their examinations, lack of expertise by the examiners, timeliness of exams, and unclear procedures from the VBA. The Medical Disability Examination Office has been proactive as-of-late in modifying contracts and implementing new processes meant to improve the C&P experience. However, much is still left for improvement. You can watch the hearing [here](#).

EO SUBCOMMITTEE HOLDS OVERSIGHT HEARING ON DIGITAL GI BILL

On September 26, the Economic Opportunity (EO) Subcommittee for the House Veterans' Affairs Committee held an oversight hearing titled, "Digital GI Bill in Disarray: Holding the Biden-Harris Administration Accountable for VA's Costly Mismanagement." Representatives from VA, the VA's Office of Inspector General (OIG), and Accenture were present and provided in-person testimony. Noticeably absent was

Under Secretary for Benefits Josh Jacobs who was invited but did not attend.

In March 2021, the VA began to create a digital platform for the GI Bill. The platform would allow GI Bill claims processing and is intended to provide capabilities to improve timely and accurate delivery of educational payments and determine real-time eligibility and benefit information. Further, the platform would also provide the ability for GI Bill students to engage with VA through electronic outreach, intake, and upgraded communication tools for on-the-spot service. However, since that time, there have been significant cost overruns in the creation of the new platform and the timelines for implementation have been pushed back. The cost has more than doubled from the initial \$453 million to the current \$932 million. The OIG listed some of the contributing causes as poor contract oversight and planning, incomplete test environments, and unclear/unrealistic goals for implementation. During the hearing, Congress made clear that they would not tolerate any more cost increases and cited a definite concern with a lack of leadership accountability.

SUPPORTING THE VETERAN CAREGIVER COMMUNITY

On September 25, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC) held a hearing to examine support of veterans and their caregivers through programs like VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC). Much of the conversation focused on PCAFC, the unavailability of respite care, the Veterans Health Administration's budget shortfall, and the urgent need for Congress to pass the Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act.

During the hearing, it was apparent that VA's assessment of the availability of respite care differed greatly from the committee members and other witnesses. The department said the use of respite has increased exponentially in the past couple of years. According to them, it's risen 222 percent since fiscal year 2022. Normally, veterans with spinal cord injuries and disorders (SCI/D) are placed in one of VA's acute or long-term care SCI/D centers for respite. But in many parts of the country, insufficient funding coupled with

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the elimination of staff positions and unfilled vacancies has severely limited the availability of respite care.

HVAC Chairman Mike Bost (IL-R) also noted that for the past 18 months or so, VA has been working on changes to the current PCAFC regulation. An announcement about the proposed regulatory reform was expected months ago. The chairman discussed this in his opening comments and urged the Administration to release its proposed changes as quickly as possible.

Finally, RAND, a research organization, briefed the committee about the results of their new study on caregiving. The study was released the previous day. One of their key findings was that military and veteran caregivers incur an estimated \$8,583 in annual out-of-pocket costs associated with their caregiving responsibilities. Others demonstrated the urgent need for Congress and the VA to increase access to mental health and substance use treatment for caregivers and their children. The video recording and relevant documents which include a statement for the record that PVA submitted can be viewed [here](#).

HOUSE HOLDS OVERSIGHT HEARING ON 988 LINE

In July 2022, the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) partnered with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to create the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, a national emergency response line intended to be a critical resource for people experiencing a mental health crisis. When a veteran caller presses “1,” they are connected to the VCL.

On September 18, the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee (HVAC), Subcommittee on Health [held an oversight hearing](#) examining the operations and effectiveness of the VCL. Testifying on behalf of the VA was Dr. Matthew Miller, Executive Director of Suicide Prevention. The panel also included Dr. Julie Kroviak, Principal Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Healthcare Inspections on behalf of the Office of Inspector General (OIG).

Recent data shared by Dr. Miller in his testimony illustrated the demand for well-trained VCL staff and for

robust mental health services offered by the VA. In the two years since standing up the 988 line, the VCL has seen an increase of 22.7 percent in calls per day, a 76.7 percent increase in texts per day, and a 27.5 percent increase in the chat feature offered through the platform. The higher utilization of the VCL has led to increased demand for staffing. Currently, the VCL has 1,078 full time employees. Additionally, the number of Crisis Responders has increased from 542 in February 2021 to 1,084 in August 2024.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, the VCL is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 356 days a year by call, text, or chat features. You can press 1 to be connected to the VCL or stay on the line to be connected to a counselor.

NEWS OF NOTE

NDRN to Hold Virtual Premiere for Documentary on Barriers to Voting

On October 10, the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN) will be premiering their film, “Accessing Democracy.” This interview-style documentary allows voters with disabilities to communicate the barriers they face when performing activities of daily living and receiving necessary services. The non-partisan documentary also provides voters with disabilities with the platform to express what they want from their next commander in chief. [Registration](#) for the virtual premiere is now open.

SSA Releases 2024 Action Plan Detailing its Efforts to Improve Operations

On August 14, the Social Security Administration (SSA) released its [2024 Action Plan](#). The plan lays out 27 of the SSA’s top priorities for the remainder of the year. SSA Commissioner Martin O’Malley states that action on each of the initiatives has already begun and some of the strategic initiatives will need beyond the end of the year to be fully accomplished. These priorities stem from over 5,000 recommendations made by employees and internal and external stakeholders.



Paralyzed Veterans of America

Great Plains Chapter



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Paralyzed Veterans of America Great Plains Chapter (Great Plains PVA) is a non-profit organization that has dedicated over 50 years to helping veterans with spinal cord injuries, as well as other individuals living with disabilities across Nebraska, Western-Iowa, and Kansas. Great Plains PVA is dedicated to improving quality of life by providing education, promoting equal opportunities, encouraging independence, and enhancing lifetime health and fitness. PVA is at the forefront helping and advocating for the rights and benefits of veterans and all people living with disabilities.