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# Washington Update

Visit the [PVAAction Force](#) page to view our latest alerts and a list of key legislation and its status. Also, check out PVA's new [AIR Commission resource page](#).

## HOUSE PANELS SCRUTINIZE VA ACCREDITATION PROCESS FOR CLAIMS REPRESENTATIVES

PVA submitted a statement for an April 27 hearing looking at the VA's accreditation process for individuals who assist veterans and survivors with VA claims, appeals, and related matters. The joint hearing conducted by the House Veterans' Affairs Disability and Memorial Affairs and Oversight and Investigation subcommittees was prompted by a growing concern that increasing numbers of unaccredited entities are taking advantage of veterans or their survivors.

PVA reminded the subcommittees that the current accreditation standards may seem cumbersome, but that is because the stakes are high. After all, those accredited to represent veterans before the VA have access to veterans' and claimants' most personal data, including Social Security numbers, private health information, marital status, and children's information. It should not be easy to access this information, and the accreditation requirements exist to protect veterans and their families so that they can fully trust the VA with the information required to adjudicate their claims. Unfortunately, we have heard numerous stories

about veterans signing contracts that commit them to give up their VA eBenefits logon and other private information to an unaccredited organization. Many of these veterans are locked into paying months' worth of benefits if a claim is granted, contrary to the accepted formula set out in statute.

This hearing was recorded so you can watch it [here](#). And as a reminder, assistance from PVA's service officers is completely free of charge. Please do not pay for any kind of benefits help before checking with [PVA's Veterans Benefits Department](#) or another reputable veterans service organization whose staff are specially trained and experienced in working with veterans' claims.

## VA ADDS NINE RESPIRATORY CANCERS TO LIST OF ILLNESSES CAUSED BY BURNED PITS

VA is formally adding nine rare respiratory cancers to the list of presumed service-connected disabilities due to military environmental exposures to fine particulate matter. The following list of rare respiratory cancers will be added to VA's regulations through an Interim Final Rule published in the Federal Register on April 26:

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- Squamous cell carcinoma of the larynx.
- Squamous cell carcinoma of the trachea.
- Adenocarcinoma of the trachea.
- Salivary gland-type tumors of the trachea.
- Adenosquamous carcinoma of the lung.
- Large cell carcinoma of the lung.
- Salivary gland-type tumors of the lung.
- Sarcomatoid carcinoma of the lung.
- Typical and atypical carcinoid of the lung.

A [press release](#) announcing the recent action says a focused review of scientific and medical evidence showed there was biological plausibility between airborne hazards and carcinogenesis of the respiratory tract and that the unique circumstances of these rare cancers warranted the presumption of service connection. VA will begin processing disability compensation claims for veterans who served any amount of time in the [Southwest Asia theater of operations](#) from August 2, 1990, to the present, or Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Syria, or Djibouti beginning September 19, 2001, to the present. Veterans who have or had one of the listed cancers during or after military service may be eligible for disability compensation benefits. VA intends to contact impacted veterans and survivors to inform them about their eligibility and will provide information on how to apply.

## WHITE HOUSE AND FEDERAL AGENCIES RELEASE EQUITY ACTION PLANS

On April 14, the White House launched a new [website](#) with their plan to advance equity. The [agenda](#) includes simplifying applications for government services, such as reducing the complexity of applications and forms; engaging with stakeholders and communities who have been historically excluded from policy-making processes, by making forums easier to attend; narrowing wealth gaps, by expanding job and grantmaking opportunities for people with disabilities; and collecting and reporting disability data.

In addition, more than 90 federal agencies released the first-ever Equity Action Plans to address barriers in policies and programs that prevent underserved communities, like people with disabilities, from

achieving prosperity, dignity, and equality. All Equity Action Plans can be found on the White House's [website](#).

The [VA](#) laid out their plan to address inequities that underserved veteran populations face. Underserved populations include veterans of color, women veterans, LGBTQI+ veterans, veterans with disabilities, rural veterans, and others who face persistent inequities.

The VA plans to use data to monitor whether health care and disability benefit outcomes are equitable for underserved populations; improve access and outcomes across key programs and services by completing three equity assessments; increase contracting opportunities for women-owned small businesses and small disadvantaged businesses; and support the inclusion of equity in quality improvement and performance monitoring. Furthermore, the VA will build and maintain trust with underserved veterans by conducting human-centered design research.

In addressing inequities impacting individuals with disabilities, the [Department of Health and Human Services](#) plans to invest in resources and engage in efforts to enforce nondiscrimination practices in health care.

The [Department of Homeland Security](#) is reviewing airport screenings to ensure equitable service and expand access to TSA PreCheck for individuals with disabilities.

The [Department of Transportation](#) is engaging with communities in decision-making to proactively review potential discrimination in proposed projects.

The [Department of Interior](#) is expanding access to the National Park System by improving transportation within and access to parks and public lands for individuals with disabilities.

The [Department of State](#) appointed a Special Advisor on International Disability Rights and is coordinating a global campaign to celebrate the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The [Department of Labor's](#) Office of Disability

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Employment Policy launched online dialogues on the effectiveness of employment programs and services for people within the disability community.

## NEWS OF NOTE

### **CMS Offers Medicare Part A and Part B Enrollment Grace Period**

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) is providing equitable relief to individuals who could not submit premium-Part A or Part B enrollment or disenrollment requests timely due to challenges contacting CMS by phone. This relief applies to the 2022 General Enrollment Period, Initial Enrollment Period, and Special Enrollment Period. If individuals were unable to enroll or disenroll in Medicare because they could not reach CMS by phone after January 1, 2022, they will be granted additional time, through December 30, 2022. For more information, call [1-800-772-1213](tel:1-800-772-1213) or use their [Office Locator](#) to find the number for a local office.

### **CBPP Annual Report on Social Security and Poverty**

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) has updated its annual report on Social Security and poverty. The report offers an array of statistics showing how much Social Security benefits contribute to reducing poverty in every state and lifting more Americans above the poverty line than any other program in the U.S. Without Social Security, 22.5 million more adults and children would be poor, according to analysis using the March 2021 Current Population Survey. Although most of those whom Social Security keeps out of poverty are aged 65 or older, 6.4 million are under age 65, including almost 1 million children. Depending on their design, reductions in Social Security benefits could significantly increase poverty, particularly among older adults. The full report can be found [here](#).

### **Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard Examines Housing Accessibility in America**

The Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University has issued a report examining 2019 American Housing Survey data to present a picture of national housing trends and how well they address the needs of people with disabilities. Findings included data showing that about five percent of households reported that they experienced difficulty navigating or using their homes, amounting to a total of 6.8 million households. Across all age groups, 13 percent of households (1.6 million) had at least one resident who used a crutch, manual wheelchair, or power wheelchair due to a long-term condition, and these households were more likely to experience poor housing fit. The authors note that the research “highlights the need for universal design, flexible design, and home modifications to improve housing fit, but it also raises questions that will be relevant to housing policy design.” The full report can be found [here](#).

### **Free Upgrade to My HealtheVet Premium**

A My HealtheVet Premium account allows you to access more of your health records; send secure messages to your VA Care Team; manage your VA appointments; view your military service information; and protect your account with more security. Click [here](#) to learn more.

### **Military Space-A Travel Resumes After Two-Year Pandemic Pause**

On April 22, Air Force officials announced that Space A Travel for eligible individuals has resumed. On March 21, 2020, the Department of Defense (DOD) suspended most Space-A travel aboard Air Mobility Command and contracted aircraft in order to limit COVID-19's spread and impact on the force. The reopening permits Space-A travel for uniformed service members, retirees, dependents, and reservists to travel within the continental United States and outside the continental United States, if space allows. Officials caution that travel limitations may be reinstated to help stop the spread of any future outbreaks of COVID-19. Also, all individuals, regardless of vaccination status, are still [required](#) to

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wear a mask in military terminals and on DOD transportation assets. Additional information about Space-A travel can be found on the [Air Mobility Command Travel Site](#) and at [militaryonesource.mil](http://militaryonesource.mil).

## SURVEYS, WEBINARS, AND HEARINGS

### REMINDER: Comments Needed on DOT Proposed Rule on Access to Lavatories on Larger Single-Aisle Aircraft

The Department of Transportation (DOT) recently published a [notice of proposed rulemaking](#) that would eventually require an accessible lavatory on larger single-aisle aircraft. DOT is seeking comments not only on the rule but also about whether the proposed timeline should be shortened or accessibility requirements lessened to provide more access sooner. We encourage PVA members to [submit individual comments](#) about the importance of having lavatory access on single-aisle aircraft as soon as possible.

### HERL Seeking Participation in Survey on Autonomous Vehicles

The Human Engineering Research Laboratories (HERL) at the University of Pittsburgh, led by PVA Member Dr. Rory Cooper, is seeking participation in a large survey for the Department of Transportation to determine how to meet the needs of people with disabilities, older adults, and their family caregivers as autonomous vehicles and transportation systems are planned and implemented.

The survey takes only a few minutes to complete. The link to the study can be found [here](#). More information is available [here](#).

### Gulf War Exposures and Health Concerns

On May 12, the VA will be hosting a virtual class to help Gulf War veterans understand potential exposures and health effects, steps to manage symptoms, research findings, and available resources. The class is scheduled to run from 1:30 – 3:00 p.m. ET and you can attend through your personal computer, smart phone, or tablet. To learn more about the class and to register, click [here](#).

### Service Animals in Health Care Settings

The Mid-Atlantic ADA Center hosted a webinar on April 20 to provide an overview of service animal regulations as they apply to medical providers.

The webinar, presented by Claire Stanley from the National Disability Rights Network (with a little help from her service dog, Tulane), addressed some commonly asked questions on the topic, such as: Are emotional support animals allowed? and How can people with allergies also be accommodated?

For questions or to receive a transcript from this webinar once it becomes available, reach out to [adatraining@transcen.org](mailto:adatraining@transcen.org) or call the Mid-Atlantic ADA Center at 301-217-0124.

### Annual Disability Statistics Collection Webinar Now Available Online

The Annual Disability Statistics Collection webinar held on March 10 is now available online. To watch the webinar, or review materials, go to [disabilitycompendium.org/event](http://disabilitycompendium.org/event).

### Upcoming VA Committee Activities

Please visit the House Veterans' Affairs Committee [webpage](#) and the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee [webpage](#) for information on upcoming hearings and markups.

