



Statement for the Record
Encouraging Work Through The Social Security Disability Insurance Program
House Committee on Ways and Means
Subcommittee on Social Security
June 19, 2013

Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) is pleased to submit this statement for the record for the hearing Encouraging Work Through The Social Security Disability Insurance Program. PVA is the only Congressionally-chartered veterans service organization solely dedicated to representing veterans with spinal cord injury and/or dysfunction. PVA has led the cause of putting disabled veterans back to work for decades. From championing the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1991 to removing mobility and structural barriers to access across all sectors of society, the organization has given voice to the plight of veterans with catastrophic disabilities who are hindered in finding employment. The following information highlights some of PVA's successes in helping veterans with disabilities return to work through its vocational rehabilitation program and involvement as a Ticket to Work Employment Network (EN).

Social Security and Veterans with Disabilities

It is often forgotten or overlooked that many veterans with disabilities are Social Security disability beneficiaries. Veterans with service-connected disabilities rated 60 percent or greater more than likely qualify for Social Security disability insurance (SSDI). This is due to the fact that they have a pre-military work record or coverage under Social Security from their military service. Veterans with significant disabilities acquired outside military service may qualify either for SSDI or, if their work history is slight, for Supplemental Security Income (SSI). In the case of the latter group, however, they will likely also qualify for veterans' pension, which more than offsets SSI.

According to Social Security data¹, in 2010, there were 771,000 veterans with disabilities receiving Social Security benefits. Of that number, over 15 percent were younger than age 50.

What separates veterans with disabilities who receive Social Security benefits from their non-veteran counterparts is their access to the VA health care system regardless of their income. Veterans with even modest service-connected disabilities gain access to Department of Veterans Affairs [VA] Medical Centers, outpatient clinics, home health care services, durable medical equipment and pharmaceutical benefits without cost. Veterans on SSDI or VA pension with non-service-connected "catastrophic" disabilities

¹ Social Security Bulletin, Vol. 71, No. 2, 2011

– in VA parlance – are also eligible for VA health care with no co-payments. Moreover, the Department of Veterans Affairs offers a number of housing and vehicle modification grants to certain veterans with disabilities. Housing and transportation are frequently cited as components, in addition to health care, necessary for individuals with disabilities to function in the community.

Despite the long term services and supports afforded by the VA, labor force participation among veterans with significant disabilities is disturbingly low. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in August 2012, "about 3 million veterans, or 14 percent of the total [of all veterans], reported having a service-connected disability. Three in ten of those 3 million veterans had a service-related disability rated at 60 percent or greater. These veterans had a workforce participation rate of 26.1%.²

Generally, research studies and surveys indicate that the percentage of veterans with severe disabilities who are disconnected from the workforce ranges from 65 to as high as 85, depending on a number of factors such as demographic variables, injury-related factors, employment history, psychosocial issues, and disability benefit status.³

Veterans with disabilities face many of the same work disincentives as other individuals with disabilities receiving benefits from Social Security. All veterans with disabilities on SSDI face the SSDI cash-cliff if they want to go to work. Not only does the prospect of losing their own benefits prove daunting but the loss of vital family benefits is another barrier to surmount. In addition, countless instances arise in which federal programs serving people with disabilities coordinate poorly with someone's status as a veteran. For example, proposals to modify SSI resource limits to encourage work and savings usually leave out low income veterans with disabilities on the VA equivalent of SSI – veterans' pension. Many policy strategies have been discussed over the years to raise resource limits under SSI so that beneficiaries would be encouraged to work and save enough to purchase a home, for retirement, or to open a business. Because low income veterans with disabilities are likely to be on VA pension -- with its own asset/resource limitations -- rather than SSI, they would not benefit from such a proposal.

Exacerbating the problem is the number of veterans with disabilities who want to work but remain bound to social security disability benefits due to underfunded state career assistance programs. Within that group of veterans mentioned above, many are eligible Ticket holders (beneficiaries enrolled in Social Security's Ticket to Work program) who, instead of progressing toward vocational independence, idle on waiting lists for state Vocational Rehabilitation services strapped for funds.

There has been a growing number of government initiatives implemented to target the problem of veterans unemployment: laws such as the Veterans' Employment

² Employment Situation of Veterans, Bureau of Labor Statistics News Release, USDL-13-0477, March 20, 2013

³ [Ottomanelli L, Goetz L, McGeough C, Suris A, Sippel J, Sinnott P, Wagner TH, Cipher DJ.](#) (2009). *Methods of a multisite randomized clinical trial of supported employment among veterans with spinal cord injury.* [J Rehabil Res Dev](#);46(7):919-30.

Opportunities Act and the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act; state-run America's Job Centers; the Department of Defense's enhanced Transition Assistance Programs; the Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans' Workforce Investment Programs, to name a few. Despite this plethora of programs and services, rampant veteran unemployment persists for a number of reasons.

For one, many career assistance programs offer a "one size fits all" approach that does not address the unique needs of a significant number of veterans: for example, those who are catastrophically disabled, single parents, homeless, etc. Others do not offer adequate follow-up after initial job placement to ensure sustained success. Many do not engage employers who harbor stigmas about veterans and misconceptions about the cost of disability accommodations. Perhaps most critically, too many of these programs rely on veterans approaching them for services rather than proactively reaching out to veterans. In the case of veterans with disabilities, these programs also fail to foster higher career expectations early enough, if at all, during the rehabilitation process.

Paralyzed Veterans of America Vocational Rehabilitation Program

To respond to the employment challenges facing veterans with disabilities, PVA launched a vocational rehabilitation program in December 2006, with an acute focus on improving employment outcomes for veterans with spinal cord dysfunction and other severe injuries. In addition to providing career assistance services, the program's objectives were to build a nationwide employer network, educate businesses to promote the hiring of disabled veterans, and market the program's services to consumers and businesses. The successful expansion of the program to six regional offices was attributed to several distinct features: proactive engagement of injured veterans during rehabilitation [an early intervention model], use of customized vocational plans based on participants' needs and readiness for employment, the creation of an ever-growing employer network, and sustained case management after initial job placement.

PVA's vocational rehabilitation program was established through innovative public/private partnerships between PVA, corporate partners and the federal government such as the Department of Veterans Affairs and Social Security Administration. Our corporate partners include Agility, Activision Call of Duty Endowment, Altria, QTC, UPS and the Kim and Harold Louie Family Foundation.

PVA was an early supporter in the creation, passage and implementation of the Ticket to Work program. After regulatory improvements were made to the program, PVA became an Employment Network [EN] in 2007 as part of a two-part strategy to reduce disabled veteran unemployment while generating revenue for its vocational assistance program through Ticket to Work.

As a two-front war led to the prevalence of "invisible disabilities," like traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder, the need for vocational programs that could assist chronically unemployed veterans grew. Given the highly regarded success of Paralyzed Veterans benefits program, the organization's investment in providing comprehensive benefits services to any veteran or dependent provided the strategic blueprint for addressing the veteran-unemployment problem on a broader scale with an effective program offering an intervention model that holistically addresses the needs of

all unemployed veterans. Where traditional vocational rehabilitation methodologies chiefly focused on mere job placement, PVA incorporated access to education resources, prosthetics equipment, continuous therapy, full VA monetary and ancillary benefits, participation in adaptive sports, and volunteer activities as critical components of effective vocational intervention with lasting results⁴. Additionally, as the wellbeing of spouses, caregivers, and children increasingly proved to be critical to the successful recovery of affected veterans, the need to provide career assistance services for veterans' family members became one of the program's objectives as well. The program was renamed "Operation PAVE" [Paving Access to Veterans Employment] in May 2011 to signify this expanded scope and integrated advocacy design, as well as to enhance the program's appeal to the veteran community.

To date, Operation PAVE has served over 1500 veterans and their family members. The program includes approximately 700 companies and organizations in PVA's employer network and has placed clients at 150 of these partners at an average starting salary of \$40,748.

PVA's program currently delivers on-site and remote vocational intervention services from one of six Department of Veterans Affairs' Spinal Cord Injury Centers: Augusta, Boston, Long Beach, Minneapolis, Richmond, and San Antonio. The respective outer regions covered by each office are as follows:

LONG BEACH Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Utah	BOSTON Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania (East), Rhode Island, Vermont
SAN ANTONIO Arkansas, Colorado, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas	AUGUSTA Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Puerto Rico, South Carolina
MINNEAPOLIS Alaska, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wisconsin, Wyoming	RICHMOND District of Columbia, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania (west), Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia

⁴ "A predictive model of employment identified 4 factors associated with employment: education, community mobility, functional independence, and decreased medical complications. Other variables significantly associated with employment included community integration, independent driving, independent living, higher income, and life satisfaction." [Anderson CJ, Vogel LC](#). (2002). *Employment outcomes of adults who sustained spinal cord injuries as children or adolescents*. [Arch Phys Med Rehabil](#). 83(6):791-801.

PVA's certified vocational rehabilitation counselors are located in VA spinal cord injury centers around the country. As soon as a veteran comes into an SCI center for treatment of a new injury, or an existing injury, PVA counselors arrange to meet with the veteran to discuss the merits of returning to the workforce. They don't wait until the veteran completes rehabilitation but begin the conversation about the veteran's future even as he or she is undergoing medical therapy. Our counselors do constant outreach to employers to determine the types of jobs they are looking to fill and screen job candidates according to those needs to streamline the hiring process. Once a veteran is placed in a job, our counselors continue to check in with the veteran and the employer to answer any questions that may occur about job accommodations.

Outlined below are some of the activities of our vocational rehabilitation offices and the dates these offices opened thanks to the private sector partnerships forged by PVA.

Augusta - Opened in 2010 under sponsorship of Agility Defense & Government Services.

- Top Employer Partners - Trinity Hospital, Enterprise Holdings, Savanna River Project, Proctor & Gamble
- Opened discussions with various wounded warrior support groups, such as TAPS, Georgia Department of Labor, and Department of Defense staff at Ft. Gordon to partner on strategies to recruit new veterans and develop job leads with the Department of Labor
- Established rapport with the Talent Acquisition Manager for Enterprise Holding in order to explore strategies on the best methodologies to get veterans hired nationwide in the rental car industry

Boston- Opened in 2011 under sponsorship of Activision's Call of Duty Endowment.

- Top Employer Partners - Raytheon, Citizens Bank, Boston University, Harvard School of Public Health, Amtrak, Harbor One Credit Union, Manpower Services, University of Massachusetts-Boston, Massachusetts General Hospital and American Standard
- Joined Greater Boston Employment Cooperative which is group of Job Developers who meet regularly and share job leads. They represent organizations serving persons with disabilities.
- Established liaison with University of Massachusetts Boston Veteran Services to provide vocational assistance for graduating veterans.

Long Beach - Opened in 2009 under sponsorship by QTC & Louie Foundation

- Top Employer Partners - Defense Commissary Agency (DECA West), The Army & Air Force Exchange Service (Western U.S.: CA, WA, AZ, Nevada), Professional Hospital Supply, L3 Communications, RMI International, NuVasive, Zephyr Partners, U.S. Fish & Wildlife (Portland, Sacramento), Raytheon (El Segundo), Spawar (San Diego)
- Established relationship with new U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife Service office now based in Sacramento and strengthened relationship with regional office in

Portland, Oregon with continued plans to share federal job opportunities that can be filled non-competitively.

- Led monthly patient education program called “Getting Back to Work” at the VAMC Spinal Cord Injury Centers in Long Beach, and San Diego, CA which included patients, family members and staff.

Minneapolis - Opened in 2008 under sponsorship by Tri West Corporation

- Top Employer Partners - U.S. Fish and Wildlife, IBM, General Mills, Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Bank, Wells Fargo, SAIC, Northrup Grumman, Dept. of Veterans Affairs, Opportunity Partners
- Conducted targeted employer outreach with major companies such as IBM, Best Buy, General Mills, and General Motors
- Established job skills group with the Minneapolis SCI and CWT programs to discuss important job issues such as SSDI, available employers, and local state resources. Have set up direct follow up plans for three veterans to assist with employment support

Richmond - Opened in 2007 under sponsorship by Healthnet Services

- Top Employer Partners - Ride-Away, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Dominion Power, Luckstone, Pearl Interactive, Bender Consulting, Arc, Tidewater Community College, USP, SAIC, NAVAIR, PVA
- Arranged, lined up and presented tours of SCI center to Lincoln Property, Altria, Luckstone, Farm Bureau Virginia and Military to Medicine
- Gave presentation on Operation PAVE and disability awareness to HR hiring managers for US Fish and Wildlife

San Antonio - Opened in 2009 under sponsorship by Agility Defense & Government Services

- Top Employer Partners - Department of Veterans Affairs, Wounded Warrior Project (congressional interns), Knowbility (non-profit), DeCA, ARC specialties (Houston robotics company), GSA, Accenture (staffing company), Lighthouse for the Blind, Goodwill Industries, USAA
- Met with a Regional HR director for Walmart to discuss strategy to help vets navigate through the hiring process in San Antonio and Austin
- Obtained an agreement with the Texas Foundation of Hope to provide free training and jobs for veterans & dependents

By 2015, PVA hopes to create a network of 5,000 public and private sector employers that fully embraces the potential of veterans in the labor force; place 1,800 severely disabled, moderately disabled, and able-bodied veterans into meaningful vocational pursuits and open new vocational rehabilitation offices in Seattle, Chicago, Tampa, New York, Cleveland, and Denver. Our long range objectives are to significantly reduce the number of unemployed severely disabled, moderately disabled, and able-bodied veterans in the U.S. by year 2020; become a leading national resource for public and private sector employers seeking to hire veterans; and open new vocational rehabilitation offices in all 24 VA Spinal Cord Injury Centers around the country.

As noted previously, many of the veterans and their family members served by Operation PAVE are Ticket holders. Unfortunately, many of these clients who come to PVA through the typical VA rehabilitation or Defense Department transition assistance programs report that they were unaware of the Ticket to Work program until informed of the program by a PVA counselor. They may have been fully briefed on the array of veterans' and military retirement benefits to which they have access. However, information about Social Security work incentives that may also be useful to them is not consistently provided by the VA or DoD. PVA will incorporate information about Ticket to Work into training of its national service officers so that, in the intake process with veteran clients, they will be prepared to address this low level of knowledge about Social Security work incentives.

PVA's role as an Employment Network has not been without challenges. Compliance standards set by SSA for ENs change frequently and paperwork requirements are a source of frustration for many counselors because these administrative demands take time away from serving clients. At the same time, other counselors are complimentary of the training and other informational tools made available by SSA through the YourTicketToWork website.

PVA has worked with over 400 clients with assignable Tickets, 195 of whom have entered employment status. Unfortunately, many of these clients assigned their Tickets elsewhere, declined to assign their Ticket or otherwise did not have their Ticket assigned to PVA. As a result, PVA lost out on that revenue stream once the beneficiaries went to work and off of benefits.

Still PVA is proud of the positive results produced through its participation in Ticket to Work. According to data reported to Operation PAVE by the Social Security Administration in 2011, the average number of days from start of services to first job placement was 19. The average hours worked per week was 37 and the average hourly wage for those working was \$18.50. Moreover, the percentage of Ticket holders with successful job placements in PVA's Operation PAVE was 28% compared to the state average of 23%.

The average monthly SSDI payment for veterans with disabilities under age 62 in 2010 was \$1191⁵. Using very rough calculations, and understanding that clients go off benefits at different times, PVA estimates that those 195 clients with assignable Tickets going off benefits for one year would result in an approximate savings of \$2,786,940. If these clients successfully remain in the workforce for the full 60 month outcome payment period, the taxpayers will reap a savings of \$167,216,400.

However, the true mark of success for PVA's vocational rehabilitation program exists in the real-life impact it has had on the lives of the veterans, spouses, dependents, and caregivers we serve. The following narratives illustrate how Operation PAVE – and its collaboration with the Ticket to Work Program - has brought our country closer to ending rampant unemployment for those who have served, one veteran at a time:

⁵ Military Veterans and Social Security Update, SSA Office of Retirement and Disability Policy, Social Security Bulletin, Vol. 71, No. 2, 2011

 Mr. F. is a 61-year-old Army combat veteran who served during the Vietnam War as a radio operator. Following his honorable service, he worked steadily until he began having health problems, including a liver transplant, heart surgery and bilateral eye surgeries. In October 2006, he became the victim of a drunk driver and required a total hip replacement and below knee amputation. At the time he was a well-established owner of a small manufacturing company that he was subsequently forced to close due to his health issues. In July 2010, our PAVE counselor began assisting the veteran. After providing a vocational assessment and introducing him to job ideas, job search engines, and developing a federal resume, he finally accepted a permanent full-time position as the Assistant General Manager for MasterCraft Safety, Inc., making \$65,000 a year plus receiving a food stipend, laptop, 3-bedroom apartment and car.

 Mr. F. is a 50-year-old Army veteran, and a Wounded Warrior of the OEF/OIF era. He served in Iraq in the infantry until his discharge in 2003. He was referred for services by his medical clinical team at the VAMC in Long Beach, who'd been treating him for PTSD, Traumatic Brain Injury and damage to his hand. His PAVE counselor spent 8-9 months involved with vocational exploration services. Having not worked since 2008, he was relatively unfocused but motivated to gain focus and work. In February 2011, he applied to the Los Angeles Air Force Base Commissary in El Segundo for a part-time store associate position. He was offered the position and began working in mid-May 2011.

 Mr. W. N. is a 45 year old Army veteran from Texas with an incomplete cervical spinal cord injury. He met his PAVE counselor in 2009, who continued to “court” him over the next two years. Mr. N. wasn't quite ready to work yet but was working on his second master's degree. His counselor persuaded him to take part in a networking event sponsored by Comsys, an IT recruiting company, in July of 2010. There, our counselor introduced Mr. N to a hiring manager with Accenture, who drove from Dallas to attend the event. Following that meeting and ongoing discussion between the PAVE counselor and employer, Mr. N. was hired by Accenture earlier this year as a Service Desk Supervisor of a call center and earns over \$44,000.00 a year.

 Mr. E.Z. is a Navy veteran who became paralyzed as a result of a motorcycle accident in June of 1991. He has over 16 years of customer service and sales experience. He and his VR counselor explored several possibilities with the owner of Ride Away and set the veteran up with an interview for a possible sales position. When this opportunity fell through because of Mr. Z's condition, they shifted the job search and focused on potential employers such as Luckstone, Farm Bureau of Virginia, USP, ARC, and Wal-Mart Distribution Center. On June 6, 2011 the veteran was hired by HMC, a Wellpoint/Blue Cross Blue Shield affiliate. He is working as a Workforce Analyst making an annual salary of \$46,000.

 Mrs. G. is a 51 year old spouse of a disabled veteran who has a spinal cord injury. She became a displaced worker in 2009 when the local Wells Fargo office closed and has been searching for work for the past two years. In the meantime, she has been a caregiver to her disabled husband and raising her family, as well as taking care of the family and the household. Mrs. G. expressed an interest in finding a job

in administrative or a clerical setting to her VR counselor. She started working at Sun Trust in the mortgage default department as a customer service representative on September 12th, working full-time at \$15 an hour.

In summary, PVA believes that its holistic approach to vocational rehabilitation for people with significant disabilities offers a successful model for policymakers seeking ways to promote return to work among beneficiaries of Social Security disability programs. Starting a conversation about work early in the rehabilitation process engages the person with a disability in thinking positively about his or her future. Assurance of health care and other long term services and supports, irrespective of income, means that a person with a disability does not have to worry about earnings affecting the ability to live in the community. Trained counselors working with clients to develop vocational plans tailored to their needs and connect them to a well-established network of employers ensures that people are prepared to meet the demands of today's workforce marketplace. Follow-along supports that continue according to the individual's needs rather than terminating contact at a set point after a job is started means that the client always has a resource to which to turn.