
501(C)(3) Veterans Non-Profit

STATEMENT OF JULIE HOWELL

PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

BEFORE THE

SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ON

INDEPENDENT SPIRITS: VETERANS HEALTH &

HEALING THROUGH ADAPTIVE SPORTS

FEBRUARY 4, 2026

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and members of the committee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) appreciates the opportunity to testify on the importance of adaptive sports in disabled veterans' rehabilitation process, independence, and quality of life. Adaptive sports are often a lifeline for disabled veterans, especially PVA members – veterans who have acquired a spinal cord injury or disorder (SCI/D). For almost 80 years, PVA has been a voice for thousands of veterans with catastrophic injury or illness, ensuring that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is prepared to care for our nation's most vulnerable veterans. The VA offers health care and benefits for millions of veterans but rarely discussed are ancillary programs like adaptive sports, which provide a range of benefits for disabled veterans.

PVA is proud of its role in the evolution of adaptive sports. Our sports and recreation program offers year-round adaptive sporting and recreation opportunities across the country, which benefit thousands of disabled veterans nationwide. Between January and July of this year, PVA will host 30 adaptive sporting opportunities from California to Maine. These events include an adaptive pickleball camp, the wheelchair rugby invitational, a bass fishing tournament series, paracycling camps, wheelchair basketball camps, and a new outdoor recreation experience. Our outdoor recreation program is designed to boost confidence and self-esteem, as well as introduce new skills that allow veterans to feel more comfortable in outdoor sports and in their daily lives.

In partnership with our 33 chapters across the country, PVA's sports and recreation team provides opportunities for veterans to engage in new adaptive sports that promote a healthy, active lifestyle, while fostering community and independence. The opportunities made available to PVA members through adaptive sports are endless, but one of the most important benefits of connecting veterans with adaptive sports and recreation is the improvement in both physical and mental health. Adaptive sports and rehabilitation within the VA could be considered preventative health care, given the vast benefits.

PVA's adaptive sports and recreation team also works hard to fill gaps in rural communities where access to adaptive sports is often more limited than in urban areas. We work with our chapters to build community around adaptive sports and help them host local events to increase awareness and access. Our team also works to ensure that veteran athletes who excel in their sports are connected to the Paralympic pipeline. PVA's annual events calendar culminates in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games (NVWG), the largest gathering of veteran wheelchair athletes in the country.

NVWG and the VA's Adaptive Sports Grant Program

With VA's support, PVA provides important adaptive sports programming to catastrophically disabled veterans. The NVWG, which PVA hosts in partnership with the VA, brings together hundreds of veterans each year, fostering teamwork, camaraderie, and independence. For many novice wheelchair athletes, the NVWG is the first time they've flown, stayed in a hotel, or attended such a large event since their injury or diagnosis. A separate program, the VA's Adaptive Sports Grant Program, is well-established and meticulously administered, enabling organizations like PVA to offer opportunities to improve independence, well-being, and quality of life through adaptive sports.

Adaptive sports are much more than just recreation; they are a critical component of healing, rehabilitation, and community reintegration. They provide supportive opportunities for veterans to regain their confidence and independence while discovering a community that understands the complications and challenges faced by people with significant disabilities.

It is difficult to describe how impactful adaptive sports can be on an individual veteran's life. PVA members who participate in adaptive sport programs improve their cardiovascular health, increase their strength, stability, and endurance, all of which can lead to a longer and healthier life. The benefits of adaptive sports go beyond just improved physical health; they can also have a profound impact on veterans' mental health.

James, an Air Force veteran, told PVA, "I love adaptive sports; they saved my life. [They] got me off drugs and alcohol, and my suicidal ideations stopped. When I first came in 2018, I was depressed and suicidal and didn't really want to be here. Another veteran I met schooled me, talked to me

about the competition and the games, and what it's like to have like-minded people being here. I went home with three gold medals and a bronze that year." Similarly, Jason, a Marine Corps veteran, spoke of the power of adaptive sports by saying, "Living in the darkness, living with depression, keeping yourself in dark places, you eat yourself away. But being able to push barriers, that helps people know there is more to life. Adaptive fitness can help save a life; it gives you a great sense of purpose."

The VA's Adaptive Sports Grant and adaptive sports more broadly help improve the lives of disabled veterans. It's important to note that VA staff facilitate these transformational programs. Occupational therapists, physical therapists, and recreational therapists work in coordination, along with other providers, to offer evidence-based treatment and rehabilitation, improve wellness and lifestyle, and ultimately improve a veteran's quality of life. Recreational therapists are professionals who assist veterans in finding a reason to re-engage with the world around them post injury or diagnosis in a holistic way. They offer individualized care that impacts a veteran's social, cognitive, and physical health and helps to bridge the gap between their clinical rehabilitation and community reintegration.

PVA has long testified to the profound impact of recreation and recreational therapists, as demonstrated in the testimony of PVA Past President, Donald H. Broderick, before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee in 1975. In his testimony, Past President Broderick testified that:

"Patients are left to their own devices, resulting in rampant deviant behavior. Instead of scheduled recreational and cultural activities in the evening hours and on weekends, the patient is forced to seek diversionary interests for himself. For the average person this is of no consequence, but to a man who has recently suffered such an injury as to make him question the value of life, the results can be more crippling than his paralysis. Rather than have young men turn to drugs and alcohol, suffer unnecessary emotional strain, and devoid themselves of motivation and expectations needed to recover from the catastrophic disabilities of paraplegia, blindness, or multiple amputation, we can assist them. . . . It is a proven fact that the greatest number of failures in rehabilitating a person, occur in the evening hours and on weekends when they are away from work. It seems senseless to throw away the efforts, money, and most important, individuals' lives, because of the failure to teach that person how to cope with his leisure time. Money and specific programs must be directed in this area, or we shall lose many valuable men to a life of failure, and ultimately, confinement in VA hospitals. You must prod the VA to take action and begin an active and effective program of recreation."

Congress and the VA heeded these suggestions and, over the years, have developed robust adaptive sports and recreation programs that promote physical and mental health, foster collaboration and increased engagement between the VA and veteran organizations, and ultimately have a lasting impact on the lives of thousands of veterans. Several PVA members who discovered adaptive sports at the VA and participated in the NVWG have gone on to become Paralympians representing Team USA. Marco, a Marine Corps Veteran, is a two-time Paralympian. Mason competed on the USA Wheelchair Rugby team, where they took the Silver Medal, and Jason competed in para-archery, where he took home the Gold for Team USA.

PVA is proud of its legacy of improving access and opportunity through adaptive sports. We work closely with the VA, not only hosting events but also with the grant program staff, who are an invaluable resource. There is no single location or team that enables PVA to do what we do; countless staff members behind the scenes collaborate with us to make adaptive sports available to our nation's disabled veterans.

Legislation to Improve Independence for Disabled Veterans

Several pieces of legislation have already been introduced in the 119th Congress that would improve veterans' quality of life and enable them to engage in adaptive sports. Like most Americans, access to safe and reliable transportation is essential to the mobility, health, and independence of catastrophically disabled veterans. Improving transportation access is a top priority for PVA, which is why we advocated for the passage of the Veterans AUTO and Education Improvement Act (P.L. 117-333). This life-changing legislation authorized the VA to issue a second auto grant to an eligible veteran starting initially with veterans who received their grant more than 30 years ago.

The bill not only authorized an additional auto grant for eligible veterans, but it also amended the definition of "medical services" to include certain vehicle modifications (e.g., van lifts) offered through VA's medical benefits package. Specifically, it amended the definition of "medical services" under 38 U.S.C. § 1701(6) to include the provision of medically necessary van lifts, raised doors, raised roofs, air conditioning, and wheelchair tiedowns for passenger use. The change was intended to codify VA's existing practice of furnishing certain items, like van lifts and wheelchair tiedowns, to catastrophically disabled veterans. However, where the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has used these items as examples, the statute defines them as the only types of modifications that are permissible.

Unfortunately, the language in the bill inadvertently limited VA's ability to support some veterans eligible for this benefit. The Automotive Support Services to Improve Safe Transportation (ASSIST) Act (S. 1726) seeks to address this by amending 38 U.S.C. § 1701(6) to give the department greater flexibility to make the necessary modifications to veterans' vehicles. This change would help the

department ensure veterans can safely enter or exit the vehicle and transport needed equipment, including power wheelchairs. PVA strongly supports S. 1726 and urges its swift passage.

Next, housing adaptations are often necessary for catastrophically ill and injured veterans to live a safe and independent life. Although important, an adapted home is more than just a wheelchair ramp through the front door. Without internal modifications, veterans with SCI/D may be forced to live in homes that don't meet their needs and greatly inhibit their ability to move about within them or to use the kitchen or bathroom with any level of independence. Because of these accessibility concerns, PVA strongly supports the Autonomy for Disabled Veterans Act (S. 1644).

VA's Home Improvements and Structural Alterations (HISA) grant is intended to help veterans and servicemembers make medically necessary improvements and alterations to their primary residence. Typical modifications include improvements to the entrance or exit from their homes, restoring access to kitchens or bathrooms, and updates to plumbing or electrical systems to accommodate medical equipment.

The lifetime HISA allowance is \$6,800 for veterans needing adaptations due to a service-connected condition. Veterans rated 50 percent disabled or greater may receive the same maximum amount even if a modification is necessary due to a non-service-connected disability. Additionally, veterans who are not service-connected but enrolled in the VA health care system can receive up to \$2,000. HISA grant rates have not been adjusted since 2010, despite labor and construction costs rising more than 50 percent in the same period. S. 1644 would update the baseline rate and tie the grant amount to a construction index, which will help it keep pace with inflation. PVA strongly supports this legislation.

A critical component that may be necessary for some disabled veterans to engage in adaptive sports is access to prosthetic devices. The Veterans Supporting Prosthetics Opportunities and Recreational Therapy Act (SPORT) Act (S. 3183) would include adaptive prostheses and terminal devices for sports and other recreational activities in medical services furnished to eligible veterans. PVA supports the Veterans SPORT Act, which would remove the need for special authorization for a veteran to receive an adaptive device that would improve their access to adaptive sports and other forms of recreation, while removing bureaucratic barriers to assistive devices for disabled veterans.

Finally, VA lacks a unified and standard approach to the management and delivery of prosthetic devices, which can cause various issues for disabled veterans. Prosthetic departments are managed through VHA directives, handbooks, and local Prosthetic Clinical Management Programs, not statute. There is currently no congressionally mandated national prosthetics formulary that could be compared to pharmacy benefits management. Clinical decisions are often routed through

prosthetics committees with variable standards. Coverage determinations may rely on internal guidance, vendor contracts, or clinician familiarity rather than a uniform national criterion. Due to these discrepancies, veterans often report inconsistent access to advanced prosthetics, limited transparency regarding denials or approvals, and confusion about appeal options.

PVA is unclear how creating a national formulary for prosthetic supplies and services as directed by the Veterans Prosthetics Advancement and Reform Act (S. 2981) would help address these concerns. While we support the intent of the legislation, we believe it could be strengthened by including language that ensures access to adaptive devices for whole health, recreation, adaptive sports, and other programs that help facilitate veteran independence. We also believe language should be included that authorizes the purchase of prosthetic devices not listed on the formulary in the case of unique needs for veterans. Prosthetic devices are rarely one size fits all. Many adaptations are tailored to the individual veteran, and we would like to avoid limiting their options.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share our views before the committee today. With the upcoming Winter Olympics and Paralympics, we are glad to help elevate the importance of disabled veterans, particularly in adaptive sports. Whether a veteran is a Paralympian or a novice just getting started, and everyone in between, adaptive sports have the ability to empower them and their communities through their remarkable achievements.