EXPAND ELIGIBILITY FOR VA CAREGIVER SUPPORT SERVICES

The Issue

Severely disabled veterans with a service-connected injury or illness do not have full access to caregiver support programs and services from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). As a result of Public Law 111-163, the “Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010,” the VA only provides comprehensive benefits as part of the Caregiver Support Program to caregivers of veterans with a service-connected injury that was incurred after September 11, 2001. Specifically, these benefits include health care coverage through the VA’s Civilian Health and Medical Program of Veterans Affairs, a monthly stipend based on the care provided, and payment for travel and lodging when participating in medical appointments with a veteran.

The majority of PVA members are excluded from these VA caregiver benefits because of the arbitrary selection of the September 11, 2001 date; or because the law also excludes veterans with serious illnesses or diseases such as Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) and Multiple Sclerosis (MS), both of which have a catastrophic impact on activities of daily living, and eventually leave veterans dependent upon caregivers. The needs of service-connected, catastrophically disabled veterans should be not based on the date of injury. No reasonable justification (other than cost considerations) can be provided as to why pre-9/11 veterans with a service-connected injury or illness should be excluded from the caregiver program.

To ensure that all service-connected, catastrophically disabled veterans receive adequate caregiver support services from the VA, PVA recommends that Congress enact legislation to expand eligibility for the VA Caregiver Support Program that eliminates the post-9/11 injury requirement, and includes “serious illnesses and diseases” in the eligibility criteria. PVA strongly supports the “Caregiver Expansion and Improvement Act of 2013,” (H.R. 3383 and S. 851), which would eliminate the post 9/11 injury requirement, and the “Support Our Services to Veterans’ Caregivers Act, H.R. 3672, which proposes to include “serious illness” as a criteria of the current caregiver program. PVA also supports S. 1982 (formerly S. 1950), the “Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act of 2014,” which among other provisions, proposes to expand eligibility for VA caregiver assistance benefits to veterans who became injured prior to September 11, 2001.

As severely disabled veterans begin to age, the responsibilities of their caregivers grow, as well as their need for VA support services. Both the exclusion of “serious illnesses and diseases,” and the use of the “date of injury” as an eligibility requirement for such an important benefit is unfair, and likely to have negative impacts on veterans’ quality of care and well-being.

PVA’s Position:

- Congress should enact either the “Caregiver Expansion and Improvement Act of 2013,” (H.R. 3383 and S. 851), the “Support Our Services to Veterans’ Caregivers Act,” H.R. 3672, and S. 1982, the “Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act of 2014.”
- Congress should introduce and pass legislation that would expand eligibility for VA’s comprehensive caregiver assistance benefits to veterans with a serious illness or disease regardless of veterans’ dates of injury or illness.