



LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES 118TH CONGRESS

Blinded Veterans Association (BVA) is constantly seeking the support of legislators in enacting policies that will assist blind and low vision veterans, monitoring favorable legislation, and keeping members apprised of new information regarding legislation. Our members are represented on the Hill during congressional committee meetings – and with individual congressional members and their staff – by the government relations team. BVA has successfully supported several key pieces of legislation in the past – and looks forward to continuing to fight the good fight for blinded veterans in the year ahead.

BVA hopes that this first session of the 118th Congress will proactively address the following legislative priorities:

- **SAFEGUARD OCULAR CLINICAL STANDARDS OF CARE**

Seek congressional mandate that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) immediately reinstate the following language into the VA Community Care “Standardized Episode of Care (SEOC): Eye Care Comprehensive” guidelines that “Only ophthalmologists can perform invasive procedures, including injections, lasers, and eye surgery.” Urge VA to be mindful of the appropriate roles of optometry and ophthalmology as it seeks to establish national standards of practice within VA health care systems.

- **ESTABLISH CAREGIVER CLINICAL STANDARDS FOR BLINDNESS**

Ensure that VA implement caregiver benefits for catastrophically “blinded” disabled veterans, mandating the modification of eligibility criteria regarding “Activities of Daily Living” to include caregivers for blinded veterans; and create a clinical eligibility standard for blindness (defined 2/200 or worse, or a visual field of 5 degrees or less).”

- **OVERSEE COMPLIANCE WITH TRANSPORTATION SERVICES**

Call on congressional oversight of the VA Veteran Travel Service (VTS) program to identify and document challenges blinded veterans are dealing with when trying to get to and from their VA medical appointments. Furthermore, BVA seeks Visual Impairment Service Team Coordinators (VIST) be granted authority to make clinical determinations for Special Mode Transportation (SMT) authorizations for blind and low vision veterans.

- **OVERSEE COMPLIANCE WITH ACCESSIBILITY REQUIREMENTS**

Seek stronger congressional oversight and agency transparency on VA's progress of updating websites, files, and applications that are still inaccessible to blind and low vision individuals, as well as mandating the designation of an enterprise-wide Chief Accessibility Officer for accountability purposes.

- **SUPPORT BLIND REHABILITATION SERVICE FUNDING**

Ensure adequate funding to support the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) new Continuum of Care for over 80,000 low vision and legally blind veterans on Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS) caseload rosters and support congressionally mandated maintenance of staffing at pre-COVID levels. VHA must maintain the current bed capacity and full staffing levels in the Blind Rehabilitation Centers (BRCs) that existed at the time of passage of the "Veterans' Health Care Reform Act of 1996" (Public Law 104-262). Centralize BRS funding to prevent diversions of BRC Full Time Employee's or funds designated by the Veterans Equitable Resource Allocation System at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) level. Conduct a resource/demand gap analysis to identify VIST and Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialists (BROS) whose caseloads are now over-capacity. Conduct oversight to ensure VHA is meeting capacity requirements within the recognized systems of specialized care in accordance with Public Law 104-262 and the "Continuing Appropriations and Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 2017," (Public Law 114-223).

- **IMPROVE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES FOR WOMEN VETERANS**

Congress must fully fund and support gender specific health care for women veterans. VA must continue creating and fully staffing high quality, clinically relevant services for women veterans.

- **ENACT PROTECTIONS FOR GUIDE AND SERVICE DOGS**

Implement stricter guidelines for animals eligible for entrance onto VA properties and to ensure standardization across all facilities, and support implementation of training policies for VA employees on guide and service dog etiquette to increase safety of the dogs and handlers while also raising awareness. Support a dedicated guide dog champion at the Veterans Affairs Central Office (VACO) and at each VAMC.

- **SUPPORT VISION RESEARCH FUNDING**

BVA supports \$30 million funding of the Department of Defense (DoD) Vision Research Program (VRP) Peer Reviewed Medical Research Program for extramural translational battlefield vision research.