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**STATEMENT OF
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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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Chairman Van Orden, Ranking Member Pappas and Members of the Subcommittee:

DAV (Disabled American Veterans) appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony for this oversight hearing titled, "Pushing VA Forward: Review of VA's Adaptive Programs for Disabled Veterans".

DAV is a Congressionally chartered non-profit veterans service organization composed of nearly one million wartime service-disabled veterans. Our single purpose is to empower veterans to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity.

VA adaptive programs play a crucial role in enhancing the quality of life for service-disabled veterans. These programs provide financial assistance for essential modifications and specialized equipment, enabling veterans to live more independently and safely by enhancing their mobility, accessibility, and overall well-being. These programs foster veterans' independence while enhancing their mental, emotional, and physical health, allowing them to engage more fully in daily activities and social interactions. Adaptive sports initiatives complement these efforts by promoting physical activity, building confidence, and helping veterans lead meaningful and fulfilling lives.

In partnership with the VA, DAV is proud to co-host two events each year focused on adaptive sports initiatives for service-disabled veterans. One of these events is the Winter Sports Clinic in Snowmass, Colorado, which brings together nearly 400 veterans from across the country with spinal cord injuries, amputations, traumatic brain injuries, and near blindness. These veterans are introduced to adaptive skiing, sled hockey, scuba diving, rock wall climbing, educational sessions, and other activities. Various types of adaptive equipment are used based on the severity of each veteran's injury, and hundreds of ski instructors volunteer their time to support the event. The success of this clinic is heavily reliant on the dedication of these volunteers. We could not conduct these events without the invaluable support of the VA and corporate sponsors. Their contributions are essential to making this life-changing event possible for our nation's service-disabled veterans.

DAV and VA also co-host the National Disabled Veterans Golf Clinic, which introduces veterans to the therapeutic benefits of golf and other activities, including

kayaking, bicycling, bowling and shooting. Each year, this event brings together over 200 veterans from across the United States to Riverside, Iowa. These veterans, who have serious disabilities such as spinal cord injuries, traumatic amputations, and significant visual impairments, receive intensive instruction from over 75 PGA (Professional Golfer's Association) professionals. This event is life-changing for both veterans and their caregivers, as they learn together how to engage in these activities upon returning home.

VA Health Systems Research, *Management Briefs eBrief-no154*, and *Therapeutic Recreation Journal* reviewed the benefits and barriers to participation in adaptive sports programs for disabled veterans. The reviews found that adaptive sports significantly improve veterans' independence, well-being, and quality of life. The results indicate veterans make significant improvements in their psychological health, and reductions in mood disturbances such as depression and anger. These studies highlight the need to expand existing adaptive sports equipment programs and create new initiatives.

In addition to the positive impact of adaptive sports programs, it is important to recognize the comprehensive support provided by the VA's adaptive equipment programs. The VA administers a range of adaptive programs, each with distinct requirements, designed to address the diverse needs of different veteran populations. These programs encompass both residential modifications and automotive adaptations, ensuring comprehensive support for veterans across various aspects of daily living.

The Home Improvements and Structural Alterations (HISA) grant program is an initiative that provides veterans with financial assistance to make necessary modifications to their homes. These modifications, such as installing ramps, widening doorways, and adding accessible bathrooms, significantly enhance the safety and accessibility of veterans' living environments. By addressing physical barriers within the home, this program empowers veterans to live more independently and comfortably, reducing the risk of injuries and improving their overall quality of life and well-being.

The Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) grant program is another essential initiative that supports veterans with severe disabilities by providing housing adaptations to create barrier-free environments for veterans with severe disabilities. These adaptations include constructing wheelchair-accessible homes, installing specialized fixtures, and structural changes to accommodate mobility devices. This program's emphasis on creating tailored living environments for veterans with significant physical challenges ensures they can live safely and independently. By offering substantial financial support for these specialized adaptations, the program helps veterans achieve a higher level of comfort and functionality in their daily lives.

The Special Home Adaptation (SHA) grant program helps veterans with certain service-connected disabilities to modify or purchase a home. It provides allowances for adaptations to accommodate specific disabilities with the goal of enabling service-disabled veterans to live independently in a home that meets their specific needs. While

both the SAH and SHA initiatives target improved living conditions for veterans, their respective services and financial support vary.

The Automotive Adaptive Equipment program focuses on providing veterans with the modifications to their vehicles, enabling them to drive safely and comfortably. These upgrades include hand controls, wheelchair lifts, and other assistive devices addressing the needs of disabled veterans to ensure that they can maintain their independence and engage in community activities without limitations.

Although the benefits these adaptive programs bring to veterans are invaluable, our members have identified several concerns, particularly the complexity of the eligibility requirements. Each program has similar yet distinct eligibility criteria, which can make it difficult for veterans to distinguish between them or they may not be aware of their eligibility for more than one program. This lack of clarity can hinder veterans from accessing the full range of benefits available to them. In some cases, eligibility requires approval from both the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), further complicating the process and potentially delaying access to necessary modifications and equipment. In addition, when VA does not verify eligibility properly, it can create an overpayment of benefits.

A significant issue for housing grants is the conflict between building code enforcement and the specific needs of veterans. For instance, if a veteran requires a larger opening to a room to accommodate a wheelchair or other mobility device, an electrical outlet may need to be removed. Should the building code mandate a certain number of outlets in the room, this modification could render the room non-compliant, resulting in serious delays and substantial hardship for the veteran. Similarly, modifications such as lowering countertops for accessibility may not align with existing building codes, causing further delays and complications. These conflicts highlight the urgent need for better coordination between VA and local contractors to ensure that necessary modifications are implemented as required and in a timely manner.

There are also instances where communication lapses have led to significant delays in project completion. For the SAH and SHA programs, the failure of VA to maintain regular communication with veterans and builders has led to delays and disputes. Similarly, veterans have reported challenges with understanding the eligibility criteria and navigating the application process for Home Improvements and Structural Alterations grants, often stemming from inadequate communication and support from VA representatives. These examples underscore the need for improved communication and support from the VA to ensure veterans can effectively access the benefits from these programs. The VA should implement a centralized case management system, assign dedicated liaison officers, enhance digital communication tools, improve staff training, coordinate with local authorities, and expand outreach efforts to ensure veterans receive timely and effective support in accessing adaptive equipment and housing programs.

Improving IT systems for eligibility reviews could also speed up the process and reduce unnecessary overpayments. It is essential for VA staff to be well-versed in the specifics of each program to reduce errors. The VA should collaborate more closely with state and local officials to request exceptions to building codes, without compromising safety, when applying any of the housing modification programs. Training for VA personnel should emphasize the timeliness of communication throughout the process. Ensuring that veterans understand what is needed from them will help mitigate delays and confusion, ultimately improving the efficiency and effectiveness of these vital programs.

Finally, funding shortages present significant challenges for VA adaptive equipment programs. Allocated funds often fall short of meeting the growing demand and rising costs associated with these adaptations. For instance, the maximum grant amounts have remained unchanged for years, despite inflation and increasing construction costs.

By addressing both physical and psychological needs, adaptive equipment and sports programs empower service-disabled veterans to live more independently, engage in their communities, and enjoy a higher quality of life. To sustain these efforts, Congress must collaborate with the VA to secure increased funding, raise grant maximums, improve communication, upgrade IT systems, and enhance VA staff training—ensuring these programs continue to meet the evolving needs of veterans with disabilities and provide the resources and opportunities they deserve.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I would be pleased to answer questions you or members of the Subcommittee may have.