

STATEMENT OF CARL BLAKE
SENIOR ASSOCIATE LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
CONCERNING
H.R. 4791, THE "DISABLED VETERANS ADAPTIVE HOUSING
IMPROVEMENT ACT;"
THE "VETERANS EMPLOYMENT STATE GRANT IMPROVEMENT
ACT OF 2006;"
THE "GI BILL FLEXIBILITY ACT OF 2006;"
THE "VETERANS LICENSING AND CREDENTIALING ACT OF 2006;" AND
AND AN AMENDMENT TO H.R 3082, THE "VETERAN-OWNED
SMALL BUSINESS PROMOTION ACT OF 2005"

APRIL 27, 2006

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

H.R. 4791, the “Disabled Veterans Adaptive Housing Improvement Act”

- PVA fully supports the provisions of this legislation
 - Would increase Specially Adapted Housing Grant from \$50,000 to \$60,000 and grant for veterans with service-connected blindness from \$10,000 to \$12,000
- Establishes an automatic annual index
 - This is a recommendation of *The Independent Budget*

The “Veterans State Employment Grant Improvement Act”

- PVA supports this proposed legislation
- There have always been challenges with various states in achieving services from Disabled Veterans’ Outreach Program specialists (DVOP) and Local Veterans’ Employment Representatives (LVER)
- PVA is also pleased to see that submission of annual professional qualifications will be a condition of state receipt of funds under VETS programs
- PVA has no specific views on the changes to part-time employment DVOP and LVER aspects of the bill

The “GI Bill Flexibility Act of 2006”

- PVA supports this legislation
- We believe that additional changes need to be made to ensure that National Guard and Reserve soldiers have the opportunity to take advantage of this benefit
 - If these soldiers choose to retire or leave military service following their return from combat, they lose these benefits

The “Veterans Certification and Licensure Act of 2006”

- PVA supports this legislation as another step to ensure individuals separating from the military have every opportunity to seamlessly transition to civilian life
- The establishment of a Veterans Advisory Committee on Certification,
- Credentialing and Licensure can improve this process, if it is fully supported by the Secretaries of Defense, Veterans Affairs and Labor

Amendment to H.R. 3082, the “Veteran-Owned Small Business Promotion Act”

- PVA is disappointed to see the changes to H.R. 3082 proposed in this amendment
 - PVA supported the original legislation that required at least 9 percent of procurement contracts in the VA be held by veteran-owned or disabled veteran-owned small businesses
- Government agencies almost without exception have shown that they are wholly incapable of meeting procurement goals for veteran owned businesses
- It is unfortunate that, years after the passage of P.L. 106-50, there has been no change in the attitudes towards veteran business owners, particularly those with service-connected disabilities

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Herseth, members of the Subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today on H.R. 4791, the “Disabled Veterans Adaptive Housing Improvement Act;” the “Veterans Employment State Grant Improvement Act of 2006;” the “GI Bill Flexibility Act of 2006;” the “Veterans Licensing and Credentialing Act of 2006;” and an amendment to H.R. 3082, the “Veteran-Owned Small Business Promotion Act of 2005.” We appreciate the subcommittee addressing our long-running concerns about the viability of the Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) grant. We are also pleased that this legislation addresses much needed improvements in education benefits as well as employment.

H.R. 4791, the “Disabled Veterans Adaptive Housing Improvement Act”

Currently, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has the authority to provide the SAH grant up to a maximum of \$50,000 to service-connected disabled veterans with severe disabilities. PVA fully supports this proposed legislation that would increase amount of the grant from \$50,000 to \$60,000. PVA members are the highest users of this very important grant. This grant allows veterans with severe service-connected disabilities to realize the dream of owning their own home when they otherwise may not have had the opportunity. PVA also supports the increase in the grant for veterans with service-connected blindness from \$10,000 to \$12,000.

In accordance with recommendations of *The Independent Budget*, we also support the provision that would require the VA Secretary to establish a residential home cost-of-construction index to be used to automatically adjust the amount of these grants each year. As

the housing market has continued to boom, these grants have not kept pace. Without an annual adjustment to the grants, inflation will continue to erode their purchasing power.

The “Veterans State Employment Grant Improvement Act”

PVA supports this proposed legislation as a continued attempt to ensure veterans, in particular disabled veterans, receive the best services possible. There have always been challenges with various states in achieving services from Disabled Veterans’ Outreach Program specialists (DVOP) and Local Veterans’ Employment Representatives (LVER). Most of the services in state employment offices are controlled by the office manager or administrator. They set the tone and direction of the office. If they do not believe in focusing extra effort on veterans, they can often make it difficult for DVOPs and LVERs to be as effective as they might be in an office that accords veterans their proper level of respect and deference. Furthermore, the myriad of state rules and regulations necessitates federal rules to insure a minimum standard is applied to funds and grants provided to state entities by the federal government.

PVA hopes that this legislation will reinforce those standards. PVA is also pleased to see that submission of annual professional qualifications will be a condition of state receipt of funds under Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) programs. However, implementation of these professional qualifications will require greater effort on the part of VETS, specifically the National Veterans Training Institute, as well as the Education and Training Administration. The program will only be effective if it is enforced and states are punished for not meeting the requirements. Too often in the past, states have been granted exemptions for various reasons that have made established rules ineffective.

PVA has no specific views on the changes to part-time employment DVOP and LVER aspects of the bill. We welcome the specific language requiring these employees to be employed at no less than a half-time basis. This should prevent abuses of the part time provisions by state entities. However, PVA is most concerned with the services that are provided to our veterans. If this program can improve those services, and improves them in a way that can be documented and verified, PVA sees no problem with these provisions. However, we look to VETS to ensure that these services are met by the states. The record of many states in the proper and effective use of DVOPs and LVERs has not always been encouraging. We will continue to closely monitor this program to ensure it does serve veterans and not just the states.

PVA is very encouraged by the requirement for the state to establish a licensing and certification program as a condition of a grant or contract. Together with legislation establishing the Veterans Advisory Committee on Certification, Credentialing and Licensure, it is possible that this roadblock to delayed employment of newly transitioned servicemembers can be reduced or eliminated.

The “GI Bill Flexibility Act of 2006”

PVA welcomes the “GI Bill Flexibility Act” as a means for more separating veterans to take advantage of the opportunities earned while in uniform. Providing increased versatility to veterans to take advantage of their benefits will provide greater opportunities in civilian employment. Currently rules severely limit the ability for veterans to receive lump-sum or

accelerated payments of educational benefits. By expanding this access, many training programs that have been off limits to veterans will now become available.

Though PVA supports these changes, it is only the first step in needed changes to veteran's education benefits. Perhaps the most overlooked section of this population is National Guard and Reserve forces mobilized for the Global War on Terrorism. These soldiers serving on active duty earn as much as \$22,000 in educational benefits during their mobilizations.

However, if these soldiers choose to retire or leave military service following their return from combat, they lose these benefits. Active duty military who choose to do the same will not lose benefits. PVA sees this as inherently unfair. Military leaders are quick to point out that retention is their prime concern and see this program as a tool in keeping soldiers in the Guard and Reserves. We understand these concerns, but disagree that these soldiers who honorably served should be denied this benefit that they have earned. We hope that changes to the GI Bill do not end with this legislation.

The “Veterans Certification and Licensure Act of 2006”

PVA supports this legislation as another step to ensure individuals separating from the military have every opportunity to seamlessly transition to civilian life. The training and experience achieved during military service makes veterans well-suited to be successful in civilian life. New veterans are motivated, dedicated and drug-free. An employer could not ask for a better type of employee.

It is troubling to Veterans Service Organizations that many of these veterans leave military service with skills and experiences often well above their civilian counterparts who did not serve. However, these veterans are hampered because they do not have the specific state license or certification that can allow them to immediately enter their civilian profession. This is compounded by the unlikelihood that they reside in the state in which they will separate. Everything that can be done to improve the opportunities for veterans should be done. The establishment of a Veterans Advisory Committee on Certification, Credentialing and Licensure can improve this process. If this committee is fully supported by the Secretaries of Defense, Veterans Affairs and Labor, it may be able to help direct programs to overcome some of the challenges facing transitioning servicemembers.

Amendment to H.R. 3082, the “Veteran-Owned Small Business Promotion Act”

PVA is disappointed to see the changes to H.R. 3082 proposed in this amendment. In July 2005, when PVA first testified on this legislation, we welcomed the substantial move to require 9 percent of procurement contracts entered into by the VA to be awarded to small business concerns owned by veterans and service-connected disabled veterans. PVA fully supported this proposal and it is unfortunate that the committee is moving away from such meaningful legislation. Replacing this requirement with a goal that the Secretary shall establish does nothing to improve the situation. Though the 9 percent requirement may be too large or too difficult to meet, government agencies almost without exception have shown that they are wholly incapable of meeting procurement goals for veteran owned businesses. Goals are simply feel good window dressing and an empty attempt to persuade a constituency that something is being done.

This legislation attempts to soften the retreat from the original legislation by putting in place a performance review of the senior procurement official of each administration within the VA. Webster's Dictionary defines a goal as "the end toward which effort is directed." PVA expects that these procurement officials will simply show that they are meeting the intent of working toward the arbitrary goal and will continue to receive their performance awards. When working towards passage of P.L. 106-50, "Veterans Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Act of 1999," VSOs worked tirelessly to get real requirements for procurement included. We were thwarted by members of the House and Senate who had no interest in seeing veterans potentially gain on other small business constituencies. It is unfortunate that, years after the passage of P.L. 106-50, there has been no change in the attitudes towards veteran business owners, particularly those with service-connected disabilities.

PVA would like to thank you again for the opportunity to testify on the proposed legislation. We look forward to working with the Subcommittee to ensure that meaningful legislation that benefits veterans the most is enacted. I would be happy to answer any questions that you might have.

Information Required by Rule XI 2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI 2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the following information is provided regarding federal grants and contracts.

Fiscal Year 2006

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation — National Veterans Legal Services Program— \$252,000 (estimated).

Fiscal Year 2005

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation — National Veterans Legal Services Program— \$245,350.

Paralyzed Veterans of America Outdoor Recreation Heritage Fund – Department of Defense – \$1,000,000.

Fiscal Year 2004

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation — National Veterans Legal Services Program— \$228,000.

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Carl Blake is the Senior Associate Legislative Director with Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) at PVA's National Office in Washington, D.C. He is responsible for federal legislation and government relations, as well as budget analysis and appropriations. He represents PVA to federal agencies including the Department of Defense, Department of Labor, Small Business Administration, and the Office of Personnel Management. In addition, he represents PVA on issues such as homeless veterans and disabled veterans' employment as well as coordinates issues with other Veterans Service Organizations.

Carl was raised in Woodford, Virginia. He attended the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. He received a Bachelor of Science Degree from the Military Academy in May 1998. He received the National Organization of the Ladies Auxiliary to the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States Award for Excellence in the Environmental Engineering Sequence.

Upon graduation from the Military Academy, he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army. He was assigned to the 1st Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Carl was retired from the military in October 2000 due to a service-connected disability.

Carl is a member of the Virginia-Mid-Atlantic chapter of the Paralyzed Veterans of America.

Carl lives in Fredericksburg, Virginia with his wife Venus, son Jonathan and daughter Brooke.