

**STATEMENT OF CARL BLAKE,
ASSOCIATE LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR,
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
CONCERNING
THE VETERANS EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE (VETS)
AND THE PROGRAMS IT ADMINISTERS**

MAY 12, 2005

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transition Assistance Programs (TAP/DTAP)

- TAP program has been successful, but there is more to be done.
 - Continue emphasis on programs at overseas installations
- DTAP program has not been as successful.
 - Severely disabled veterans often fall through the cracks.

The Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP)

- HVRP provides help for those veterans with the most significant problems from substance abuse, severe PTSD, serious social problems, legal issues, and HIV.
- HVRP one of the most cost-effective, cost-efficient programs in the federal government.
- The Administration requested only \$22 million for HVRP for FY 2006, but the program is authorized \$50 million. Adequate funding must be provided.
- PVA recommends that it be reauthorized through FY 2011.

Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP)/Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVER)

- P.L. 107-288 required VETS to implement focused performance measures on DVOP and LVER staff.
 - Prevent staff from “cherry picking” the easiest individuals to employ.
- The advantage of face-to-face interaction between DVOP and LVER staff and veterans is critical. These positions should not be reduced.

Licensing and Certification

- Licensure and certification creates a significant barrier to employment for transitioning servicemembers.
- VETS must coordinate with DOD and certifying agencies and organizations to provide a smooth transition for employment.
- PVA recommends that a standardized licensure and certification requirement be adopted by federal and state agencies, and VETS must facilitate this process.

The National Veterans Training Institute

- PVA is concerned that after years of flat funding, appropriations for the NVTI for FY 2005 were reduced.
- PVA opposes efforts to consolidate grants that fund DVOP and LVER staff.
- DVOP and LVER staff are at risk of being eliminated if funding is consolidated with other employment programs.

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 the Department of Labor's Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS). The programs administered by VETS are vital in providing veterans with job training and placement into employment following military service. These services are an important benefit that all service members are entitled to and deserve. It is incumbent upon Congress, the federal agencies, and the veterans' service organizations (VSO) to ensure that all veterans are prepared to enter the civilian workforce upon leaving the military. This is particularly true now as many veterans are returning from the front lines of the war on terror and leaving military service.

PVA is an organization of veterans who are catastrophically disabled by spinal cord injury or disease. Our members and other individuals who suffer from similar injuries or diseases do not receive proper consideration for employment when applying for a job. This is often due to barriers in the workplace, false perceptions of the potential costs to employers of hiring people with disabilities, and the perceptions many people still have about veterans. However, veterans and disabled veterans have earned and deserve consideration within the workforce. I will limit my remarks today to the VETS programs that PVA has worked with or to the programs that have been addressed by *The Independent Budget*.

TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS (TAP/DTAP)

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) is generally the first service that a separating service member will receive. These programs offer job-search assistance and related services. TAP consists of comprehensive three-day workshops at selected military installations both in the United States and overseas. DTAP was established for service members leaving the military with a service-connected disability. This program is meant to include the normal three-day TAP workshop plus additional hours of individual instruction to help determine job readiness and address the special needs of disabled veterans.

Although PVA believes that the TAP program has been successful, more remains to be done. Continued emphasis on conducting these programs at overseas installations is a must to meet the shifting locations of our military men and women. PVA also believes that the DTAP program has not achieved the same level of success that the TAP program has. PVA members are most likely to get transition services from the DTAP because they are exiting the military through the medical retirement process. However, many times severely disabled veterans needing DTAP services fall through the cracks, especially spinal cord injured veterans who may already be getting health care and rehabilitation from a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) spinal cord injury center despite still being on active duty. Because these individuals are no longer located on or near a military installation, they are often forgotten in the transition assistance process. Although they may be eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation and Education through the VA, this does not mean they should not receive the DTAP services to which they are entitled.

While the servicemember may be at a VA medical facility, they are still assigned to the nearest military installation as a medical holdover. It is incumbent upon VETS to ensure that the necessary staff go to the medical facility—either VA or a private rehab facility-- where the severely injured servicemembers are being treated to provide DTAP services. This could be done once a month or even once a quarter so long as it is actually being done.

HOMELESS VETERANS REINTEGRATION PROGRAM

The VA estimates that approximately 275,000 veterans are homeless on any given night, and that more than 500,000 veterans experience homelessness in a year. PVA believes that the key to overcoming homelessness among the veterans population is employment. A veteran is unable to provide for himself or herself, much less a family, without the benefit of gainful employment. The Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP) managed by VETS is a valuable program focusing on employment of homeless veterans. This program has achieved wonderful success since its inception almost 20 years ago. The HVRP provides help for those veterans with the most significant problems from substance abuse, severe PTSD, serious social problems, legal issues and HIV. The specialized services needed for these veterans are often the only hope.

The HVRP is perhaps the most cost-effective and cost-efficient program in the federal government. In spite of the success of HVRP, it remains severely underfunded. Even more tragically, DOL does not request a full appropriation in its budget submission. For

FY 2006, the Administration only requested \$22 million to support this program. However, P.L. 107-95, the “Homeless Veterans Comprehensive Assistance Act of 2001,” authorized \$50 million through FY 2006. PVA, as a member of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV), supports the need to expand funding from the level proposed in the budget request. Likewise, PVA recently supported proposed legislation that was considered by this Subcommittee at a hearing on May 4, 2005, that would extend the authorization of the HVRP provided in P.L. 107-95 through FY 2008. In fact, PVA believes that the programs should be reauthorized for five more years, through FY 2011.

DVOPs/LVERs

Perhaps the most important services provided by VETS are done by Disabled Veterans’ Outreach Program (DVOP) coordinators and Local Veterans’ Employment Representatives (LVER). PVA, along with many other veterans service organizations, worked for years to have clear performance standards put in place for both DVOP and LVER staff. In 2002, VETS initiated limited performance measures based on the rates of employment and retention.

Following the enactment of P.L. 107-288, the “Jobs for Veterans Act,” VETS began implementing more focused performance measures for DVOP and LVER staff. These changes were meant to emphasize the placement of severely disabled veterans and other veterans facing barriers to employment and to avoid some forms of “cherry picking.” Though it is unpleasant to accept, when someone’s job is at risk, human nature may cause

the employment specialist to select the easy placement, over the one requiring greater effort. The revision of the duties of DVOP and LVER staff in the “Jobs for Veterans Act” and the continuing efforts of VETS to establish meaningful performance standards are essential to reinforcement of the services they provide. PVA welcomes these changes as they are essential to a viable job placement service.

PVA remains concerned that the race to simplify, computerize and decentralize the employment system through electronic-based self-service systems and one-stop career service centers might diminish the role of DVOP and LVER staff. We do believe there are some advantages to one-stop veterans’ job service offices. The ability of a disabled veteran, who may have difficulty leaving his or her home, to have access to the employment services provided can be a tremendous benefit. However, the advantage of face-to-face interaction between DVOP and LVER staff members and veterans cannot be overstated. It seems that unless there is a paradigm shift, the number of DVOP specialists and LVER staff will be reduced.

LICENSING AND CERTIFICATION

The emphasis on licensure and certification for service members transitioning to the civilian workforce can present significant barriers to employment. Most credentialing standards for civilian employment are based on traditional education and training methods. Unfortunately, there is a lack of civilian recognition of military schooling and experience for the purposes of licensing and certification. This lack of recognition may make it

difficult for transitioning service members to compete with their civilian peers or it may prevent employment entirely. PVA understands that this is not an easy problem to overcome.

The Independent Budget outlines our concerns about the licensure and certification of transitioning military personnel. It states:

The Independent Budget veterans service organizations (IBVSOs) believe that there are a number of factors that have an impact on the ability of current and former military personnel to obtain civilian credentials. Many civilian credentialing boards do not have adequate knowledge of and do not give proper recognition to military training and experience. There is a lack of clarity regarding the procedures for exchange of transcripts between military and civilian credentialing boards that creates undue barriers for military personnel.

PVA believes that VETS must make every effort to coordinate between the Department of Defense and certifying agencies and organizations. VETS must also be involved in coordinating between federal agencies and private industry. In accordance with *The Independent Budget*, PVA recommends that a standardized licensure and certification requirement be adopted by the appropriate federal and state agencies, and that VETS must facilitate this process. Likewise, recently separated service members must be afforded the opportunity to take licensing and certification exams without a period of retraining.

THE NATIONAL VETERANS TRAINING INSTITUTE

The National Veterans Training Institute (NVTI) was established by Congress in 1986.

The institute is responsible for training state and federal employees and managers who

provide direct employment and training services to veterans and service members. The NVTI provides a curriculum that addresses veterans' benefits, transition assistance, case management, marketing and accessing the media, and management of veterans' services as well as veterans' reemployment rights case investigation and grants management.

As explained in *The Independent Budget* for FY 2006, PVA is concerned that after several years of flat funding, appropriations for FY 2005 for the NVTI were reduced. This reduction threatens the ability of the NVTI to provide quality training to VETS staff, particularly the DVOP and LVER staff. In accordance with the recommendation of *The Independent Budget*, we urge you to fund the NVTI at an adequate level to ensure that veterans' employment specialists continue to receive quality training.

PVA has some concerns about the affect of proposed changes to the grant program that funds the DVOP and LVER staff. We are particularly concerned about the proposals that would provide a consolidated grant to the states for employment service programs. Governors would then be given the authority to distribute grant money to any employment program they administer with no clear specification for priority of services. Although the "Jobs for Veterans Act" reaffirmed the priority of service to veterans and disabled veterans in employment service centers, PVA has seen no accountability measures proposed that would ensure that states adhere to this priority.

PVA believes that DVOP and LVER staff positions will be at risk of being eliminated if funding for DVOP specialists and LVERs is consolidated with other employment programs. These positions could be eliminated in favor of other employment service program staff who provide similar services at employment service offices.

PVA looks forward to working with this Subcommittee to ensure that veterans have access to the employment services that they have earned and deserve. I would be happy to answer any questions that you might have. Thank you.

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 2005

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

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 (estimated).

Fiscal Year 2003

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation — National Veterans Legal Services Program— \$228,803.

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Carl Blake is an Associate Legislative Director with Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) at PVA's National Office in Washington, D.C. 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 and son Jonathan.