

**STATEMENT OF
CARL BLAKE, ASSOCIATE LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON BENEFITS
CONCERNING H.R. 4015,
THE "JOBS FOR VETERANS ACT"**

APRIL 18, 2002

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Reyes, members of the Subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) is pleased to present our views on H.R. 4015, the "Jobs for Veterans Act." PVA would like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for making veterans' employment legislation a priority.

H.R. 4015

Assisting veterans with job training and placement into employment following military service is an important benefit that all servicemembers are entitled to and deserve. It is the responsibility of Congress, federal agencies, and the veterans' service organizations (VSO) to ensure that all veterans are prepared to enter the civilian workforce upon leaving the military. Never is that concept more important than now, when we have soldiers on the ground in combat defending the freedoms that this country provides.

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. Veterans have earned and deserve consideration within the workforce. It is hoped that this bill will begin to breakdown these barriers and promise much deserved opportunities in the workplace.

There have been concerns within the veterans' community regarding the race to simplify, computerize and decentralize the employment system in this country. Electronic-based self-service systems and one-stop career service centers are but two examples of these changes. The question has always been how to continue to provide priority services to eligible veterans, while improving the employment service for veterans, as well as non-veterans.

Paralyzed Veterans of America recognizes the tremendous benefits provided by electronic systems, especially the advantages to disabled veterans. These systems provide a method to overcome the many mobility barriers that still exist in our society, despite the successes of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Although PVA applauds the efforts of the Department of Labor, the issue of priority of service for veterans remains. The requirement to provide job opportunities to veterans first, through DVOPs/LVERs at the Employment Service is in many ways contradictory to the Employment Service's role of getting individuals employed. But the desire to provide services to as many as possible cannot overshadow the attention to the specialized needs of veterans, especially disabled veterans. Many techniques of maintaining this priority have been discussed. Unfortunately any method of blocking access to a job opportunity, reserving it initially for veterans, works against efficiency. Mr. Chairman, PVA is cognizant of these competing demands and admits that no simple answer exists. But the importance of veterans' priority is foremost, and cannot be understated.

PVA is glad to see that **Section 2** of H.R. 4015 reaffirms the priority of service for qualified veterans. We welcome the specification of means to enforce these rights. In addition, the affirmative steps required of Federal contractors in this measure should help bring more disabled veterans into the workforce. This is only a first step, a step that if not aggressively enforced, will be ignored, as have so many such mandates in the past. We look forward to the Subcommittee conducting oversight hearings with the Department of Labor to ensure that these mandates are not ignored. We fully support the provisions of this section.

PVA also believes that recognition for quality veterans' employment, training, and placement services is essential. **Section 3** of the bill is a vital part of achieving high quality job training for veterans. Awards to state agencies for improvement and modernization of job training programs should encourage these agencies to provide higher quality programs to those veterans seeking employment. We support the provisions of this section.

We welcome the modified standards of performance required of the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training that stress comprehensive accountability outlined by **Section 4**. PVA believes that the need for job training programs to cooperate with private industry and business concerns, educational institutions, trade associations, and labor unions cannot be overemphasized. Cooperation is the key to maximizing resources and achieving successful job training.

Perhaps one of the most important points of this bill is the need to establish and implement a comprehensive performance accountability system to measure the performance of veterans' employment and training staff. The emphasis on placing severely disabled veterans and other veterans facing barriers to employment may help to prevent 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. It is our sincere hope that the Secretary will make this weighting advantageous enough so that Disabled Veterans'

Outreach Program specialists (DVOPs) and Local Veterans' Employment

Representatives (LVERs) will not only place severely disabled veterans, but also aggressively reach out to severely disabled individuals, allowing them to reap the benefits of full-time employment. The revision of the duties of DVOPs and LVERs is essential to reinforcement of the services they provide.

We also are cautiously encouraged by the plan for "virtual" 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. Although the loss of veterans priority of service at the one-stop centers has always been a fear of VSOs, we believe the Department of Labor and the Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) will make a good faith effort to ensure that priority of service at one-stop centers exists in more than name only. We look to this Subcommittee to insure that this effort is indeed successful.

PVA supports **Section 5** of the bill that makes additional improvements in the veterans' employment and training service. It is important that veterans be offered proper assistance in attaining a job in the civilian sector. Likewise, the modernization of service delivery points to include technological innovations is essential. Furthermore, accurate reporting on the performance of States and organizations and entities carrying out employment training and placement, to include a focus on agencies not meeting the minimum standards, is necessary to make the program more effective in the future.

PVA also fully supports the creation of the President's National Hire Veterans Committee, a committee to raise employer awareness of the skills of veterans and the benefits of hiring veterans, as outlined in **Section 6**. This committee can help bridge the gap in communication that exists between employers and veterans seeking employment. Too many employers claim to not be aware of the benefits of hiring veterans or how to actually access veterans for employment. Perhaps this committee can improve this problem.

H.R. 4015 is an evolutionary step in the veterans' employment system. We do not see this as an end, but rather as one more step in helping our veterans gain the opportunity for full employment. Whether the VETS programs are maintained in DOL or in the VA, it is most important to PVA that the programs are effective and efficient. Quality service for veterans is the first priority.

I would like to thank the Subcommittee for its efforts to involve veterans and Veterans Service Organizations in developing this legislation. 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 2002

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation—
National Veterans Legal Services Program—\$179,000 (estimated).

Fiscal Year 2001

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation—
National Veterans Legal Services Program—\$242,000.

Fiscal Year 2000

General Services Administration—Preparation and presentation of seminars regarding
implementation of the Americans With Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C. §12101, and
requirements of the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards—\$30,000.

Federal Aviation Administration—Accessibility consultation--\$12,500.

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation—
National Veterans Legal Services Program—\$200,000.

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Carl Blake is an Associate Legislative Director with the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) at the 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, disabled veterans' employment, and Gulf War Illness as well as coordinates issues with other Veterans Service Organizations.

He currently serves on the Subcommittee on Disabled Veterans (SODV), part of the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) and is a member of the Task Force for Veterans Entrepreneurship.

Carl is a native of 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 Environmental Engineering Science.

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 and his wife Venus live in Fredericksburg, Virginia.