

**STATEMENT OF  
BLAKE ORTNER, ASSOCIATE LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR  
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA  
BEFORE THE  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON BENEFITS  
ON H.R. 1460, THE VETERANS ENTREPRENEURSHIP ACT OF 2003,  
H.R. 1712 , THE VETERANS FEDERAL PROCUREMENT OPPORTUNITY ACT  
OF 2003, AND H.R. 1716, THE VETERANS EARN AND LEARN ACT**

**APRIL 30, 2003**

Chairman Brown, Ranking Member Michaud, members of the Subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) is pleased to present our views on the three pieces of legislation before you today, H.R. 1460, the "Veterans Entrepreneurship

Act of 2003”, H.R. 1712 , the “Veterans Federal Procurement Opportunity Act of 2003”, and H.R. 1716, the ”Veterans Earn and Learn Act.” PVA thanks you, Mr. Chairman for addressing the serious challenges facing veteran entrepreneurs and those seeking to pursue additional education and training.

PVA is the only national veterans’ service organization, chartered by Congress to represent and advocate on behalf of our members and all Americans with spinal cord injury or disease. All of PVA's members, in each of the fifty states and Puerto Rico, are veterans with spinal cord injury or dysfunction. These veterans suffer from catastrophic injury and disease and face challenges every day in their quest to survive and function fully in society.

### **H.R. 1460, the Veterans Entrepreneurship Act of 2003**

Paralyzed Veterans of America thanks Mr. Renzi for introducing H.R. 1460. Entrepreneurship training is an incredibly valuable process for veterans, especially disabled veterans, as they reenter civilian society. This is especially true for those with catastrophic disabilities who often have difficulty and face multiple challenges in the normal workplace. Though the Americans With Disabilities Act lowered many barriers and opened doors to those with disabilities, many of these barriers still remain. The opportunity to gain training that will make our disabled veterans self-employable will truly help individuals that have already proven that they have the drive, determination and willingness to do more and succeed during military service. Allowing these same individuals to use the many talents developed

during military service through entrepreneurship training will bring benefits to themselves and to America through increased individual and small business taxes. It is a win for everyone.

PVA is also glad to see the legislation pursue non-traditional sources of training programs such as the National Veterans Business Development Corporation while at the same time maintaining sufficient definitions to preclude entities not able to deliver on their program promises.

The Veterans Entrepreneurship Act of 2003 also provides for procurement improvements that will allow new small businesses owned by service-disabled veterans to gain access to government contracts. Perhaps the most difficult time for a small business is at its beginning. Allowing sole source contracts to service-disabled veteran-owned businesses will give them the jump start needed to develop their business. This opportunity is not a hand-out and is only available to those businesses that can successfully provide the contracted services and provide them at a fair and reasonable price. But these provisions will only be successful if contracting officers are encouraged to provide contracts to service-disabled veteran-owned businesses at the goal provided for in P.L. 106-50, the "Veterans Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Act of 1999." To date the performance of federal agencies has been dismal. We ask the support of this subcommittee to provide encouragement through legislation that these

contracting officers need to support our veterans. The provisions provided by H.R. 1712, the Veterans Federal Procurement Opportunity Act should help.

**H.R. 1712 , the Veterans Federal Procurement Opportunity Act of 2003**

Mr. Chairman, we would like to offer our special thanks to House Veterans Affairs Committee Ranking Member Evans for introducing H.R. 1712, the Veterans Federal Procurement Opportunity Act. As I have stated above, the introduction of legislation to support our disabled veterans business owners is welcomed, but if there is no requirement to provide contracts to these businesses, then it is simply an empty gesture, albeit with good intentions. H.R. 1712 puts some teeth behind the rhetoric. PVA fully supports this legislation and would like to highlight some key provisions and concerns.

PVA particularly welcomes the modification of the Small Business Act (15 U.S.C. 631 et seq.) identified in Section 2 of the legislation which excludes amounts received for a veterans service-connected disability when determining whether a veteran is economically disadvantaged.

PVA also welcomes Section 3, the Reauthorization of Programs of the National Veterans Business Development Corporation. We are encouraged by the continuing support for the veterans corporation by the subcommittee. However, in appropriating funds for the corporation, we would ask that the appropriation for FY 2005 and 2006 be earmarked for programs developed by the corporation. This

funding could especially support the Community Based Outreach Programs and the Educational Training Programs. Earmarking the funding would directly benefit the programs provided by the corporation and encourage the corporation's own self-sufficiency as envisioned by P.L. 106-50. PVA fully supports the Veterans Corporation, but also looks forward to it becoming the self-sustaining private corporation envisioned in Section 202 of P.L. 106-50. This would benefit the corporation as well as the veterans they endeavor to assist. PVA also would ask the subcommittee to carefully consider the reporting criteria placed on the corporation to insure that resources that should be used to help veteran business owners do not need to be directed into administrative overhead. We welcome the oversight of the corporation, but in the rapidly changing business environment, goals or plans for 5 years in the future may serve only as general guides that can lose their meaning shortly after being created.

PVA greatly welcomes the requirements for specific procurement goals for veterans businesses. In addition, the prohibition against "double counting" is a welcome provision. Though the double counting may benefit some classes of veterans and provide an easy method for a contracting officer to meet his agencies goals, it is deceptive and does not give a clear picture of procurement for an agency. In addition, PVA applauds language requiring a restriction on the use of funds for agencies that do not meet their goal. The only way to force agencies to meet their obligations to veterans is with an enforcement mechanism. The goals placed on agencies have been failures. Procurement officers have provided

numerous excuses and justifications for their lack of responsiveness. Unless a stronger requirement is mandated, these contracting officers will continue to ignore the intent of Congress. PVA welcomes the inclusion of penalties for material breach of the legislation for those who would attempt to violate this act.

### **H.R. 1716, the Veterans Earn and Learn Act**

PVA would like to thank House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Smith for his forward thinking legislation. The idea of a lump-sum payment of benefits for those who complete training programs early only makes good sense. The ability to encourage veterans to move on to gainful employment benefits both the veteran and society. The faster the veteran can begin to earn an income and pay taxes, the faster that veteran's self-esteem and confidence will be increased. In addition, the lump-sum payment will provide funds to become established if the veteran needs to relocate to find higher paying jobs in his new discipline. PVA also welcomes the recommendation for the Secretary to increase the use of apprenticeships. Though we do not want to remove the opportunities for those who wish to pursue educational programs, for many veterans this may not be the best pursuit for them. Apprenticeship programs can more quickly return veterans to the workforce, often at professional jobs providing a higher initial income and living wage. This is particularly important with today's veterans who are often older and have families.

PVA also applauds provisions for the pilot program identified in Section 6 to provide on-job benefits to train Department of Veterans Affairs' claims adjudicators. Increasing the limit for on-the-job training to 3 years for claims adjudicators may allow the Secretary to increase the number of adjudicators and help reduce the unacceptable backlog of claims currently facing VA.

PVA also welcomes provisions of Section 7 to share information among the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Defense and Labor with respect to on-job training. It is illogical that veterans departing military service are unable to immediately pursue employment in fields which they trained during military service. PVA understands the needs for states and private organizations to regulate professional activities in their jurisdictions. But it simply doesn't make sense that veterans trained as professionals must be retrained to meet bureaucratic paperwork requirements. We hope that the Departments will work closely with the Professional Certification Advisory Board to insure that our veterans face as few impediments to gainful employment as possible to speed their reintegration into the civilian workforce.

Veterans face many challenges as they leave military service. They have lost time to their peers who chose not to serve America. We must do whatever we can to allow them to catch up, whether it is in training, apprenticeship programs or small business opportunities. Those with disabilities face even greater challenges in both employment and often in daily living. Congress must do all they can to

provide for these veterans who have sacrificed for this nation. With the current threat of budget cuts aimed at veterans, PVA hopes that the Subcommittee will convince your colleagues that veterans have already made sacrifices and should not subsequently have their benefits sacrificed for other programs or priorities. We thank those members of Congress who are supporting legislation providing methods and techniques to open new avenues for veterans and disabled veterans' employment and business opportunities. PVA knows that there will again be obstacles placed in the way of this legislation. PVA fully supports you and will provide whatever support to help pass these valuable benefits for our nation's veterans and our citizens with disabilities.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you and the Subcommittee for its efforts to provide for our veterans. 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.

## BIOGRAPHY OF BLAKE C. ORTNER

Blake Ortner is an Associate Legislative Director for Paralyzed Veterans of America representing PVA to federal agencies including the Department of Labor, Office of Personnel Management, Department of Defense, HUD and the VA. In addition, he is PVA's representative on issues such as Gulf War Illness, homeless veterans and coordinates issues with other Veteran Service Organizations. He also often serves on special projects such as disability advisor for the dedication ceremonies of the Korean War Veterans Memorial.

He has served as the Chair for the Subcommittee on Disabled Veterans (SODV) of the President's Committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities (PCEPD) and as a member of the Department of Labor's Advisory Committee on Veterans' Employment and Training (VETS) and the Veterans Organizations Homeless Council (VOHC).

A native of Moorhead, Minnesota, he attended the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis on an Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) scholarship, graduating in 1983 with an International Relations degree. He was commissioned as a Regular Army Infantry second lieutenant stationed at Ft. Lewis, WA. Following service with the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, he became a member of the Army's Special Operations elite 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Battalion.

He continues his military service as the battalion commander of 3-116<sup>th</sup> IN, Virginia Army National Guard and returned in April 2002 from a 9-month deployment as part of the SFOR 10 peacekeeping mission to Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Mr. Ortner resides in Stafford, VA and is married with two children.