

**STATEMENT OF CARL BLAKE,  
ASSOCIATE LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR,  
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA  
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY  
CONCERNING  
H.R. 3082, THE "VETERAN-OWNED SMALL BUSINESS PROMOTION  
ACT OF 2005;"  
H.R. 1773; AND  
OTHER PROPOSED LEGISLATION**

**JULY 27, 2005**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **H.R. 3082, the “Veteran-Owned Small Business Promotion Act”**

- PVA fully supports this legislation.
  - Mandates that nine percent of contracts awarded by VA go to veteran and disabled veteran-owned small businesses.
- Three percent contracting goal established by P.L. 106-50 is not being met by any federal agency.
  - Severely disabled veterans often fall through the cracks.
- PVA believes that the National Veterans Business Development Corporation already maintains a comprehensive database of veteran-owned small businesses.

### **H.R. 1773**

- PVA supports H.R. 1773 which would make permanent the pilot program established by P.L. 102-547 that authorizes the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide direct housing loans to Native America veterans.

### **VA Office of National Disabled Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events**

- PVA supports the creation of an Office of National Disabled Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events and a director position to oversee this Office.
  - PVA has a special interest because it is a chief co-sponsor, along with the VA of the National Veterans Wheelchair Games.
- Control of this Office should be placed in the Veterans Health Administration.
  - Primary purpose of these events is rehabilitative therapy.
- PVA recommends a separate line-item appropriation for this Office.

### **Specially Adapted Housing**

- PVA supports increase in Specially Adapted Housing Grant from \$50,000 to \$55,000 and additional grant from \$10,000 to \$12,000.
  - Adaptive housing grants should be automatically adjusted annually.
- PVA supports the authorization for adaptive housing assistance for veterans who temporarily reside with parents or a sibling.

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

- PVA supports the proposed legislation that would require the DOL to establish professional qualifications for DVOP specialists and LVER staff.
- Implementation of these professional qualifications will require greater efforts on the part VETS, specifically the National Veterans Training Institute, as well as the Education and Training Administration.

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 H.R. 3082, the “Veteran-Owned Small Business Promotion Act;” H.R. 1773, a bill that permanently authorizes the Native American Home Loan Program; a draft bill to codify the VA “Office of National Disabled Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events;” a draft bill to increase the Specially Adapted Housing Grant; a draft bill to authorize adapted housing assistance for disabled veterans residing in housing owned by a parent or sibling; and a draft bill to establish professional qualifications for Disabled Veterans’ Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists and Local Veterans’ Employment Representatives (LVER). PVA particularly appreciates the efforts of this Subcommittee to address the housing needs of disabled veterans. The many improvements made by these proposals will prove vital to the men and women who have incurred a disability in service to this country.

#### **H.R. 3082, the “Veteran-Owned Small Business Promotion Act”**

PVA fully supports this proposed legislation that would require the VA to award nine percent of procurement contracts to small businesses owned by veterans, and specifically disabled veterans. As a participating member of the Task Force for Veterans Entrepreneurship, PVA has worked with many of the veterans service organizations to ensure that veterans and disabled veterans are given proper consideration for contracting opportunities with the federal government. We played an active role in the enactment of P.L. 106-50, the “Veterans Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Act of 1999.” This law established a three percent goal for all prime contracts as well as the same goal for subcontracts awarded by federal agencies for service-connected disabled veteran-

owned small businesses. However, virtually every agency within the federal government has failed miserably to achieve this goal. It is even more disheartening that the federal department responsible to veterans, the VA, has done so poorly to achieve these established goals.

In 2003, Congress enacted P.L. 108-183, the “Veterans Benefits Act of 2003,” that attempted to expand the possibilities for federal contracting with veteran-owned small businesses. This law allows federal agencies to offer sole-source contracts to veteran-owned small businesses that can successfully provide the contracted services and provide them at a fair and reasonable price.

As we have stated in the past, the flaw with P.L. 106-50 is that it establishes three percent as merely a goal for federal agencies to strive to achieve. PVA, and all of the organizations that comprise the Task Force for Veterans Entrepreneurship, have argued that three percent should be mandated. Federal agencies generally ignore this three percent goal because they know that no real sanctions can be taken against them.

For this reason, we welcome the requirement that the VA offer nine percent of procurement contracts to veteran-owned small businesses. This forces the VA to be accountable both to Congress and to the veterans it serves. The VA should set the bar that all other federal agencies should have to meet in contracting. We would encourage this Subcommittee to consider legislation that would mandate that at least three percent of all

contracting opportunities be offered to veteran-owned and disabled-veteran owned-small businesses.

PVA also appreciates the intent of the section of this legislation that requires the VA to maintain a database of veteran-owned small businesses. However, we believe that this may be unnecessary. Currently, the National Veterans Business Development Corporation (NVBDC) maintains the most comprehensive database of veteran-owned small businesses in this country. This information has been vital to the NVBDC's ability to assist veterans start their own businesses and open doors of opportunity for them. We would recommend that the VA coordinate with the NVBDC to obtain the most comprehensive information available.

### **H.R. 1773**

PVA supports H.R. 1773 which would make permanent the pilot program established by P.L. 102-547 that authorizes the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide direct housing loans to Native America veterans. It has become more difficult for veterans to purchase a home because of soaring housing prices. Native American veterans are not shielded from the same difficulties. VA home loans have proven vital in allowing veterans to realize the dream of owning a home. The rates offered by the VA afford veterans opportunities that they might not otherwise have with a private lender. PVA supports making this pilot program permanent. Likewise, we have no objection to allowing the VA to offer these loans to the spouses of Native American veterans.

## **VA Office of National Disabled Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events**

PVA supports the creation of an Office of National Disabled Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events and a director position to oversee this Office. PVA has a special interest in this Office as we are the chief sponsor, along with the VA, of the National Veterans Wheelchair Games (NVWG). Likewise, we fully support the activities of the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, the National Veterans Golden Age Games, and the National Creative Arts Festival. PVA has one of the highest participation rates of members in these events.

However, we would like to recommend that the Office be removed from the VA Office of Public Affairs and be consolidated under the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

Although these events serve as a good social event for veterans to interact, participation in these events is not just about being involved in an elite athletic competition. The ultimate purpose of the Wheelchair Games, Winter Sports Clinic, Golden Age Games and Creative Arts Festival is to provide the best rehabilitative therapy possible to maximize independence and enhance the quality of life for severely disabled veterans. Given that rehabilitation is part of the mission of VHA, we believe that it should be the controlling authority.

The importance of these events in the rehabilitation process cannot be overstated. PVA's Deputy Executive Director, John Bollinger, recently relayed a story to me about an experience he had while attending the Wheelchair Games. During the opening ceremony, he ran into a young Iraqi Freedom veteran who he had met last year at Bethesda Naval

Hospital. The young man was very depressed and emotionally strained. His mother informed Mr. Bollinger that he was having a hard time coping with his injury and situation. This was the first opportunity he had to get out and experience social and athletic activities with other veterans facing the same challenges he faces every day.

On the last day of the Games, Mr. Bollinger saw the young man again. He had won two gold medals participating in the Games. Mr. Bollinger explained that it would have been impossible to hide the smile on the young man's face. He had an entirely different outlook on life given his experiences. This perfectly exemplifies the importance of events like the Wheelchair Games in the rehabilitation process.

PVA believes that a separate line-item appropriation should be included in the VA budget to support these events. This would remove some of the burden that the VA carries when trying to raise funds to support these programs and allow it to focus on the actual purpose of these events—rehabilitation. PVA, veterans service organizations, and other co-sponsors of this events, could then continue to raise additional funds to support the events.

PVA appreciates the focus being placed on these important programs. With disabled servicemen and women exiting the military everyday, especially from Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, these programs will provide a beacon of hope to those men and women who will continue to face challenges every day of their lives. PVA encourages the Subcommittee to consider the recommendations we have made to set this Office up for success.

## **Specially Adapted Housing**

PVA fully supports the proposed legislation that would increase amount of the Specially Adapted Housing Grant from \$50,000 to \$55,000. PVA members are the highest users of this very important grant. It provides much needed assistance to veterans with severe service-connected disabilities who wish to purchase a house. 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 believe that an additional change is necessary to this grant program. 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 the purchasing power of the grants. PVA recommends that Congress amend this legislation to include an automatic annual adjustment indexed to the rise in the cost-of-living.

PVA also supports the draft legislation that would authorize the VA to provide adaptive housing assistance to disabled veterans residing temporarily in housing owned by a parent or sibling. Without this assistance, many veterans are forced to prolong their stay in a VA medical center because they have no accessible home to go to. I have personally experienced the difficulty created by this particular situation. After incurring a spinal cord injury while on active duty, I conducted rehabilitation at the VA medical center in Richmond. My wife and I were not immediately able to find a place to live due to our changed financial situation, so we lived with my parents for a couple of months. So that I

could gain access to their house while using a wheelchair, we paid to have a ramp installed and have a bathroom modified for my needs. This proved to be a substantial cost, particularly with regards to making improvements to the existing bathroom. Many young men and women could benefit from this adaptive housing assistance.

### **DVOP/LVER**

PVA has worked closely with the other veterans service organizations and Hill staff over the last few years to continue to improve the programs administered by the Department of Labor's (DOL) Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS). This is particularly true of the DVOP specialists and LVER. PVA fully supported P.L. 107-288, the "Jobs for Veterans Act," which required VETS to implement more meaningful 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."

PVA supports the proposed legislation that would require the DOL to establish professional qualifications for DVOP specialists and LVER staff. These improvements can only ensure that veterans get the best quality employment service available to them. Implementation of these professional qualifications will require greater efforts on the part of VETS, specifically the National Veterans Training Institute, as well as the Education and Training Administration.

PVA looks forward to working with this Subcommittee to ensure that meaningful improvements are made to benefits programs veterans rely upon. We would be happy to answer any questions that you may 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 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 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of the 82<sup>nd</sup> 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.