

**STATEMENT OF
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OF THE
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MARCH 9, 2006**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the 1.2 million members of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), I appreciate the opportunity to present our views on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program (VR&E) contract services and its coordination with the Department of Labor (DOL) Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS). The DAV was founded on the principle that the nation's first obligation to veterans is rehabilitation of its wartime disabled. Along with quality health care and adequate compensation, this principle envisions gainful employment as a primary step toward rehabilitation. It is our duty as a grateful nation to ensure that those who have sacrificed so dearly in the name of freedom have the opportunity and support needed for self-sufficiency.

The VR&E program is responsible for providing services and assistance to service-connected disabled veterans that will enable them to obtain and maintain stable, gainful employment. Its mission is vitally important to the thousands of servicemembers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq with serious injuries. To better serve the needs of such honorable men and women, former VA Secretary Anthony Principi formed the VR&E Task Force, which performed a comprehensive review of VR&E activities and made extensive recommendations to improve VR&E operations. Three of its recommendations pertained directly to the focus of today's hearing. Those recommendations were:

1. VR&E should develop an initial and follow-on contract management and contractor management training program for all VR&E officers, supervisors, and staff with direct responsibility for contract activities. This recommendation was based on Task Force findings that while some technical training had been conducted, it was not comprehensive enough to provide staff the level of expertise necessary for efficient contract management.
2. VR&E should create and staff a new position at each VA Regional Office (VARO) for a contract/purchasing specialist and implement a training program for these staff as recommended above. The Task Force advised doing so because the volume of procurement actions necessitates a trained, dedicated staff to efficiently manage such activities.
3. VR&E should negotiate a new memorandum of understanding (MOU) with VETS to improve and standardize nationwide the business processes and relationships between VETS Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) and VR&E. The purpose of the MOU would be to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of services delivery to disabled veterans.

The DAV is pleased that most of the steps have been taken to implement the Task Force recommendations. VR&E instructed each of its offices to designate at least two staff members as Contracting Officer Technical Representatives (COTR). Appropriate training classes and continued training material was provided to COTR staff members to enable them to fulfill their new responsibilities.

VR&E has developed a priority list to ensure that VAROs specify that new full-time employee (FTE) positions fulfill the second Task Force recommendation. VR&E also established a Contract Specialist position at the VA Central Office in order to address national contracting issues and ensure better oversight of VR&E contracting activities in the field.

A newer MOU was created between VR&E and VETS that replaced the earlier 1995 MOU. The two agencies agreed to establish three joint work groups to improve the quality of employment services and job placement services for disabled veterans. Each work group will have a list of responsibilities to direct its efforts. The three work groups will focus on the following areas:

- Performance measures for assessment of partnership program results
- National Veterans' Training Institute (NVTI) curriculum design
- Joint data collection, analysis, and reports

The three workgroups are critical to the MOU and the expansion of cooperative efforts between VR&E and VETS. While the cooperation and teamwork between VR&E and VETS has improved since the Task Force released its recommendations, progress remains to be completed. The DAV encourages the two agencies to fully establish the workgroups and continue to expand on their mutual goals to provide quality employment services to disabled veterans. Accordingly, DAV encourages the Subcommittee to ensure that each VR&E office includes at least one DVOP among its staff.

Coordination of efforts between VR&E and VETS must also continue to ensure the establishment of the key Task Force recommendation to employ the new Five-Track system of services to be available to disabled veterans consisting of:

- Return to Work (reemployment with their previous employer);
- Rapid Access to Employment;
- Self-Employment;
- Employment Through Long Term Services; and
- Independent Living

The Five-Track system provides an array of services that recognize the variant needs of individual disabled veterans. To be fully effective, the Five-Track system will require teamwork between VR&E and VETS to ensure clients receive all services appropriately suited to each disabled veteran. In accordance with resolutions adopted by the delegates to the DAV National Convention, the DAV fully supports the Five-Track system and hopes to see greater progress made in this regard.

We appreciate the Committee's interest in these issues, and we appreciate the opportunity to present the DAV's views, which we hope will be helpful.