

Mr. Carl Blake, Associate National Legislative Director, Paralyzed Veterans of America

STATEMENT OF CARL BLAKE,  
ASSOCIATE LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR,  
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA  
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,  
CONCERNING  
S. 1234, THE "VETERANS COMPENSATION COST-OF-LIVING

ADJUSTMENT ACT OF 2005?

S. 1235, THE "VETERANS' BENEFITS IMPROVEMENTS ACT OF 2005,?

S. 552, S. 917,

S. 1252, THE "SERVICE-DISABLED VETERANS INSURANCE  
IMPROVEMENT ACT,?

S. 151, THE "VETERANS BENEFITS OUTREACH ACT OF 2005,?

S. 423, S. 551, S. 909, S. 1138,

S. 1259, THE "VETERANS EMPLOYMENT AND TRANSITION SERVICES  
ACT,? AND

THE "PRISONER OF WAR BENEFITS ACT OF 2005?

JUNE 23, 2005

Chairman Craig, Ranking Member Akaka, members of the Committee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the S. 1234, the "Veterans Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2005;? S. 1235, the "Veterans' Benefits Improvements Act of 2005;? S. 552; S. 917; the "Service-Disabled Veterans Insurance Improvement Act;? S. 151, the "Veterans' Benefits Outreach Act of 2005;? S. 423; S. 551; S. 909; S. 1138; S. 1259, the "Veterans Employment and Transition Services Act;? and the "Prisoner of War Benefits Act of 2005.? PVA appreciates the efforts of the Committee to address the benefits needs of the veterans who have served and sacrificed so much for this country.

S. 1234, the "Veterans Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act?  
PVA supports S. 1234, a bill to increase the rates of compensation for veterans with service-

connected disabilities and the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for certain disabled veterans. As we have done in the past, we oppose again this year the provision rounding down the cost-of-living adjustment to the nearest whole dollar.

#### S. 1235, the 'Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act'

Section 2 of the proposed legislation would require the Secretary of Defense to make a 'good-faith effort' to notify the servicemembers' spouse or next of kin if he or she executes certain options in the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance (SGLI) plan. These options include choosing an amount less than the maximum insurable amount or designating a beneficiary other than the spouse or next of kin.

We do not believe that this provision addresses any problem that exists. It seems that this legislation is meant to prevent a serviceman or woman from making a decision that might ultimately have a negative impact on his or her family. However, we believe that this proposal is unnecessary because the servicemember has the individual right to make any election he or she chooses with regards to the life insurance plan. It should not be the responsibility of the Secretary to get involved with the effect of a servicemember's election on his or here family. Despite these concerns, PVA does not object to the legislation.

PVA does support the provisions that increase the maximum SGLI payments as well as the maximum Veterans' Group Life Insurance payments from \$250,000 to \$400,000. It is especially important that the servicemembers' families as well as veterans' families receive adequate life insurance coverage when faced with the loss of a loved one.

#### S. 552

The technical corrections made by the proposed legislation will correct a mistake made by legislation enacted during the last Congress. The provisions in question from P.L. 108-454 were intended to extend eligibility for the Specially Adapted Housing Grant to servicemembers who experience the loss, or loss of use, of both upper extremities such as to preclude use of the arms at or above the elbows. PVA supported this legislation as it was passed during the last Congress.

However, P.L. 108-454 apparently excluded servicemembers who experience these severe disabilities, and who remain on active duty, from having access to the Specially Adapted Housing Grant. Ensuring access to this grant for severely disabled servicemembers who are still on active duty was a key initiative of PVA during the 108th Congress. Many PVA members have dealt with this problem in the past. A significant number of PVA members utilize the adaptive housing grants for their homes. Unfortunately, in situations where our members come directly from active duty and are waiting for separation, they are forced to stay in a hospital or live with someone else because they do not have immediate access to the grants that would allow them to become independent much faster. PVA supports the corrections made by this proposal.

#### S. 917

PVA supports S. 917 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 American 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.

The ?Disabled Veterans Insurance Improvement Act?

Supplemental insurance for those veterans who have incurred a total service-connected disability is an important benefit available to that population of veterans. It is often extremely difficult for totally disabled veterans to get any type of insurance, particularly life insurance. This proposed legislation would increase the supplemental amount available to these veterans from \$20,000 to \$40,000. PVA supports this legislation. It is very important that totally disabled veterans get all of the assistance that they have earned and deserve.

S. 151, the ?Veterans Benefits Outreach Act?

PVA fully supports the ?Veterans Benefits Outreach Act.? This bill would require the VA to develop and implement an annual plan for outreach to veterans around the country. PVA and other veterans service organizations have previously expressed concerns about the VA not making an effort to reach out to veterans who have earned and deserve health care and benefits. Only a couple of years ago, a senior VA official provided a memorandum to medical centers around the country instructing them not to actively reach out to veterans and advertise the health care services available to veterans. This was done in light of ever-tightening budgets. PVA finds such actions deplorable and shameful.

We believe it is the responsibility of the VA to inform veterans and their families of the benefits and services available to them. VA must ensure that the needs of the men and women who have served and sacrificed are provided for. These veterans should not be allowed to be shielded from the services available to them just because it is not financially feasible for the VA to conduct outreach. Any effort the VA makes to avoid outreach is a blatant disregard of its federal obligation.

S. 423

PVA has no position on this legislation. However, we encourage Congress to ensure that any legislation that is passed reflects standards for consideration as an insurable dependent accepted by the insurance industry nationally.

S. 551

PVA fully supports this legislation which authorizes the VA to establish a national cemetery in Colorado Springs, Colorado. According to VA information, there are currently only two national cemeteries located in Colorado, neither of which is near the Colorado Springs area. With the rate that veterans are dying today, particularly World War II veterans, it is imperative that the VA be able to provide a suitable burial location for these men and women. Colorado Springs would provide an excellent cemetery location that is centrally located in the state.

S. 909

P.L. 107-330 authorized the VA to provide private government markers to veterans who have marked graves in private cemeteries. This legislation was meant to provide for recognition of those men and women who have served this nation with honor. However, P.L. 107-330 only provided this benefit retroactively to veterans who died after September 11, 2001. It excludes

veterans who died between November 1, 1990 and September 11, 2001. Prior to enactment of P.L. 107-330, the VA estimated that it denied more than 20,000 headstones or markers to these veterans. This legislation would correct this serious inequity. All veterans should be afforded the same recognition of their service following their death. PVA fully supports S. 909.

#### S. 1138

The actions of United States Army Rangers during World War II are well documented and reflect great credit upon their units. Their exploits certainly deserve recognition. However, PVA has no position on this legislation. We must emphasize that any memorial built at Arlington National Cemetery must meet the guidelines established for creation of any memorial on its grounds and that it be fully accessible to people with disabilities.

#### S. 1259, the "Veterans Employment and Transition Services Act"

PVA supports the provisions of S. 1259, the "Veterans Employment and Transition Services Act." This legislation recognizes the valuable roles that representatives of veterans' and military service organizations and related state agencies can play in providing a seamless transition for servicemembers exiting the military. These individuals can relate to the young serviceman or woman better than most people. Furthermore, they can offer substantive advice on challenges that the servicemember will face and how to overcome those challenges. Pre-separation counseling is one of the most important activities for ensuring a greater likelihood of success in the civilian world.

PVA also appreciates the emphasis placed on targeting not only active duty military installations, but also National Guard armories and family support centers as well as military medical facilities. Recognizing the fact that many National Guardsmen and Reservists left the civilian world to begin with, we cannot assume that it will automatically be easier for them to transition back to their previous life. We must do what we can to protect them from the dangers of homelessness, mental health issues, and substance abuse disorders.

#### The "Prisoner of War Benefits Act"

This legislation would repeal the requirement that a POW be held captive for at least 30 days in order to receive a presumption of service-connection for the purposes of receiving benefits. This issue was first considered last year after American service personnel who were held captive by Iraq during the early stages of the war were released or rescued after less than 30 days of internment. These men and women had sustained severe injuries as a result of combat actions and their subsequent internment. It seems only fair that any POW, regardless of time in captivity, be recognized as being eligible for service-connected benefits. PVA supports this provision.

We likewise support the addition of the following diseases to the list of diseases presumed to be service-connected: heart disease, stroke, Type II diabetes, and osteoporosis. We have no objections to the requirements placed on the Secretary of VA for adding or subtracting diseases to the presumptive service-connection list. We would only caution that veterans and former POWs should be given the benefit of the doubt before any consideration is given to removing a disease from the list.

PVA appreciates the opportunity to testify today on the proposed legislation. We look forward to working with the Committee to ensure that veterans get the benefits that they have earned and deserve.

I would be happy to answer any questions that you might have. Thank you.