

RICHARD DALEY, ASSOCIATE LEGISLATION DIRECTOR, PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

STATEMENT OF
RICHARD DALEY
ASSOCIATE LEGISLATION DIRECTOR
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
CONCERNING THE
VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT (VR& E) PROGRAM

FEBRUARY 5, 2008

Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Burr, and members of the Committee, on behalf of Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Program. PVA believes the VR&E Program is one of the most critical programs VA administers in assisting veterans with disabilities to successfully transition to civilian life.

The primary mission of the VR&E program is to provide veterans with service-connected disabilities all the necessary services and assistance to achieve maximum independence in daily living and to the maximum extent feasible, to become employable and to obtain and maintain suitable employment. In fiscal year 2007, VR&E made progress in carrying out its mission. VR&E reported a rehabilitation rate of 73% for both veterans determined to have employment handicaps as well as veterans determined to have serious employment handicaps. In FY 2007, 11,008 veterans achieved their rehabilitation goals through the program. Progress has also been made in standardizing the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) so that service members exiting military service receive the same clear and accurate information on VA benefits.

VR&E appears to be on target in implementing the Five -Track employment model which should help standardize orientation activities and put greater emphasis on the employment component of the program. VR&E's internet-based employment services resource, vetsuccess.gov, with its self-service capability is intended to be a useful employment readiness tool that is easily accessible to veterans seeking jobs.

While VR&E was successful working with newly disabled veterans in 2007, PVA believes more demands will be placed on its work load in 2008. As the war continues in Iraq and Afghanistan more and more service members will return home with life altering disabilities. It is our nation's obligation to provide the very best VR&E services for those veterans with severe disabilities.

The Independent Living (IL) Program is a VR&E program that focuses on providing services to those veterans with severe disabilities. VR&E has made improvements to the program by hiring a national IL coordinator and establishing standards of practice in the delivery of IL services. However, VR&E is still forced to abide by an arbitrary cap of 2,500 new cases each year. The consequence of this cap is that as VR&E approaches the cap limit each year, they must slow down or delay delivery of independent living services for new cases until the start of the next

fiscal year. While VR&E may not reach that cap every year, there are years that it does. In those years in the mid to late summer veterans with severe disabilities who have been determined eligible and entitled to the VR&E program have had to wait until October to receive full services. PVA strongly opposes placing a cap on Independent Living cases. The continuation of our military efforts associated with Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom will unfortunately result in greater numbers of service members who sustain serious injuries and who will need these services. With the removal of the IL cap and greater focus on serving veterans with severe disabilities, PVA recommends that VR&E be given additional professional full time employee slots for IL specialist counselors. These experienced counselors should be fully devoted to delivering services to those individuals that are determined to have serious employment handicaps.

PVA also believes that VR&E needs to focus more time and attention on those veterans who after achieving their independent living goals are ready to consider placement in suitable employment.

Recently PVA has directed some of its organizational effort to assist veterans with severe disabilities to achieve employment goals. After considering the employment possibilities of severely injured veterans and realizing the deficit in existing programs, PVA made the decision to focus efforts on an initiative to improve the employment rate of its members. PVA has a goal to ensure that all veterans with spinal cord injury or disease are given equitable employment opportunities. PVA believes in the importance of introducing the idea of employment and setting vocational goals early on in the medical rehabilitation process.

We are hopeful that by including discussions of employment expectations along with achievement of medical rehabilitation goals, veterans will be more likely to choose to return to employment sooner. As such, PVA designed a new vocational rehabilitation program to address these ideas. The concept of the program is to provide vocational rehabilitation services under a PVA - corporate partnership that augments the many existing vocational programs. PVA believes the veterans with SCI disability should be introduced to vocational rehabilitation counselors specializing in SCI disability that are able to provide extensive vocational-oriented services early in the medical rehabilitation process. If these counselors can devote more time and are able to continue to provide services as needed, the productivity and employment rates for this group of veterans will improve.

PVA formed a partnership with the VA and Health Net Federal Services, the government operations division of Health Net, Inc., and VA. We opened our first vocational rehabilitation office in the SCI Center of the VA Medical Center in Richmond, Virginia in July 2007. The workload in our pilot office has grown rapidly and our PVA vocational rehabilitation counselor in Richmond is currently carrying a caseload of 73 veterans.

The counselor selected for this position, Rick Schiessler, a Vietnam veteran with more than 17 years of experience as a vocational counselor, has established excellent relationships with the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and especially VR&E personnel located in Richmond. Mr. Schiessler's hard work, along with the cooperative spirit and work of VA personnel has already resulted in the employment of seven veterans with SCI disability. To highlight one case - Mr. Schiessler met with an individual who had a long history of unemployment. The counselor was able to find this veteran a part-time job that would

allow him to ease back into the workforce. Within a short period of time this veteran successfully adjusted to working part time, and requested full time employment. He currently enjoys his new position working in the office of the Governor of Virginia and he reports that he often works more than 40 hours each week.

Mr. Schiessler reports that he has not yet experienced any veteran who has refused vocational rehabilitation services.

With the success of our rapidly growing caseload in Richmond, PVA plans to open a second vocational rehabilitation office in Minneapolis with the corporate sponsorship of Tri West, a contractor to the Department of Defense. The success of this expansion will depend on a productive relationship established with the VHA and VR&E. We are confident that our continuing efforts in this "pilot" initiative as well as the continuing efforts of our VA partners will result in the 85 percent unemployment rate among PVA members becoming a sad statistic of the past.

PVA remains concerned that the current large caseloads and ever increasing data entry demands may be affecting the VR&E counselors' ability to deliver effective and timely services. For this reason, PVA supports VR&E initiatives such as process consolidation, if it results in VR&E counselors having more time to engage in face-to-face counseling activities and offers more extensive case management services.

Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Burr, members of the Committee, Paralyzed Veterans of America supports this Committee's effort to review and enhance the existing vocational rehabilitation programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs for the current, and future veterans of this nation. This concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer questions you may have.