

PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
2004 ANNUAL TESTIMONY
PRESENTED BY
JOSEPH L. FOX, SR., NATIONAL PRESIDENT
BEFORE A JOINT HEARING
OF THE
HOUSE AND SENATE COMMITTEES ON VETERAN'S AFFAIRS
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Mr. Chairmen and members of the Committees, I am Joseph L. Fox, Sr., National President of Paralyzed Veterans of America. With me today are Delatorro McNeal, Executive Director, John Bollinger, Deputy Executive Director, Douglas Vollmer, Associate Executive Director for Government Relations, and Richard Fuller National Legislative Director. Behind me are PVA's Executive Committee, National Directors

and Chapter Legislation and Advocacy Directors representing our almost 21, 000 members from all fifty states and Puerto Rico.

At this time I would also like to introduce a very special guest Paul Gardner who is with us today. We asked Paul to be with us today for several very special reasons. PVA's membership, veterans with spinal cord injury or disease, continues to grow for a variety of reasons. But Paul represents a very special group of new members, those injured in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since the conflicts began a significant number of new spinal cord injuries are in treatment by the DOD health care system and the VA health care system. As is our responsibility, PVA is closely following each case. We are working to coordinate health care delivery at VA's spinal cord injury centers and working with VA to make sure these veterans receive the full range of benefits. As one of our service officers told another Iraq casualty in an SCI center, "you take care of your rehabilitation; PVA will take care of the rest."

PVA found its beginnings following World War II. At that time, the life expectancy of someone who suffered a spinal cord injury could be measured in months. But somehow, at the war's end, thousands of veterans were going through successful therapies at VA hospitals around the country. This group of veterans learned quickly that the nature of a spinal cord injury presented very new medical challenges. They realized that successful rehabilitation required facing a physical environment outside the hospital that was definitely hostile to them. A wheelchair was not a welcome piece of equipment in their homes, their towns and cities. Even if they found a way to drive a car, there were very

few places they could go, stores, restaurants, movie theaters, train stations, airports, that didn't present permanent physical barriers. Worse, they feared the embarrassing and dangerous need to be lifted by strangers over those barriers.

PVA grew out of the need to overcome those challenges. Following PVA's first legislative initiatives, Congress passed the Adapted Housing Grant and Adaptive Automobile Grant to allow spinal cord injured veterans to modify their homes and have greater independence when they left the hospital. Also out of the advocacy of the early organization grew the VA's network of spinal cord injury centers and the vast improvements in SCI medicine and rehabilitation that have made VA a world leader in this field.

I share these stories to let you know we have come a long way since those early days after World War II. It is a story of veteran helping veteran. America saw a lot of conflict in the 20th century. The World War II generation helped the Korean War generation. We were young men once, (if you can believe that) and newly injured from Vietnam, we got a helping hand from those PVA members who had met the same challenges before us. We have the same responsibility now to see that Paul, and those brave men and women who served beside him who are injured in service to America, receive not just the same benefits and services we received, but even better benefits and services, and most of all the highest quality of healthcare this country can provide.

We still have a long way to go. Right now the Congress is beginning a debate over funding levels for VA health care for the next fiscal year. Last month, reacting to the Administration's inadequate budget request, PVA issued a press release with the headline, "Another Year, Another Inadequate Budget Request." I find it quite disturbing that with American fighting men and women in combat in foreign lands, with dead and injured coming home on a daily basis, that the Administration and some in Congress would propose funding VA health care "on the cheap." I do not need to remind you we are asking them to protect our freedom, our way of life and our well-being and that of our families.

We are once again involved in the yearly "tap dance" for VA health care funding in the Congressional discretionary budget process. As it has been every year, no one at the beginning of the year can foretell how much VA funding for the next is going to be. Worse, in recent years we never know when those increases are going to be made - forcing VA to limp along at the previous year's inadequate level. For the past two years alone VA didn't get its increased appropriation until four to five months into the year. No Secretary of Veterans Affairs, no VA hospital director, and no Spinal Cord Injury Center Chief knows how to plan and even provide care on a daily basis without the knowledge that the dollars needed to operate programs are going to be available when they need them. VA health care funding is always a "day late and a dollar short."

As PVA has pointed out in testimonies earlier this year, in FY 2000, VA appropriations were not enacted until October 20, in FY 2001 October 27, in FY 2002 November 26, in

FY 2003 February 20, and this year, January 23. For the past two years alone, the VA has had to struggle under the already inadequate funding levels established for the prior year fully one-third of the way through the new fiscal year. These delays directly affect the health care received by veterans, and have severe consequences upon the VA's ability to adequately plan for providing this care.

This year we find ourselves in an even more perilous situation. The Administration's budget request for health care is a shocking one, providing once again a woefully inadequate funding level for sick and disabled veterans. Calling for only a \$310 million increase in appropriated dollars, a mere 1.2 percent increase over FY 2004, this is the smallest health care appropriation request of any Administration in nearly a decade. Indeed, the VA Under Secretary for Health testified just last year that the VA requires a 13 to 14 percent increase just to keep its head above water.

Once again, too, we are faced by a request that relies to heavily on budgetary gimmicks and accounting sleight of hand rather than on real dollars that veterans need. The Administration is again resurrecting its enrollment fee and increased co-payment schemes, proposals soundly rejected by these Committees last year. So again this year, you and I must once more move through a painful and troubling process to secure the resources necessary to meet the needs of the veterans of this nation.

The only solution we can see for this Committee and the Congress as a whole is to approve legislation removing VA health care from the discretionary side of the budget process and making annual VA budgets mandatory.

In closing Mr. Chairman I spoke earlier about responsibility - PVA's responsibility to help care for veterans now and in the future – and our nation's responsibility to care for those who have borne the battle. If we are going to put men and women in harms way then we absolutely must care for them afterward. The problems of the budget process are not just a headache for the veterans service organizations, for the White House, OMB, Congressional Committees and some VA Administrators in the field. The end result is not just their concern with “process.” The problem is spinal cord injured veterans lying in beds in VA hospitals at 3:00 am in the morning waiting for nurses to answer a call button - who never comes. These veterans are who these Committees, this Congress and this Nation need to be thinking about when we talk of changing the process for the better.

Teddy Roosevelt pledge was never clearer than today.

“A man who is good enough to shed his blood for his country is good enough to be given a square deal afterwards. More than that no man is entitled to, and less than that no man shall have.”

Thank you, this concludes my remarks and I will be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.