

**STATEMENT OF CARL BLAKE,
ASSOCIATE LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR,
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
CONCERNING
THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS'
VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM**

APRIL 20, 2005

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Secretary Principi forms the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Task Force

- Task Force releases report making recommendations in March 2004
- Focus of VR&E needs to be employment, not education and training
- Most important recommendation is the Five-Track Employment Process

VA has taken steps to implement recommendations of the Task Force

- They have created a video that explains the VR&E service
- According to VA, this video is being shown at military installations during the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) or Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP)
- Video includes and explanation of Five-Track Employment Process

PVA interviewed ten spinal cord injured veterans who were injured in the last two years

- Series of questions asked regarding VR&E and the service it provides
- Four veterans of Operations Enduring Freedom or Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF)
- Six injured in the line of duty at home stations
- All service-connected with varied levels of injury

Determinations from interviews

- Three veterans currently enrolled in VR&E; none have completed the program
- Seven veterans were informed of services available, but chose not to participate
- Four OEF/OIF veterans found out about VR&E service at Walter Reed
 - Two most recently injured veterans saw the new VR&E video
 - Expressed interest in self-employment as part of Five-Track process
- Six veterans injured at home station did not hear about VR&E while at the military medical facility
 - Were approached about the service once they were transferred to a VA medical center
 - None of these six participated in TAP or DTAP
- Three veterans enrolled in VR&E have had positive experience
 - All three entered program prior to implementation of Task Force recommendations
 - Each expressed interest in the options offered under the new Five-Track Employment Process
 - Two of the three are currently enrolled in college courses
 - One veteran enrolled in the Independent Living program

Concerns of PVA

- Constraints on availability of Independent Living services
- Concerns with VR&E as outlined in *The Independent Budget*
- Need for better collaboration between VR&E and DOL-VETS

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 Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment program (VR&E). In response to criticisms about the VR&E program, the former Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony Principi formed the VR&E Task Force to conduct an “. . . unvarnished top to bottom independent examination, evaluation, and analysis.” The Secretary asked the Task Force to recommend “effective, efficient, up-to-date methods, materials, metrics, tools, technology, and partnerships to provide disabled veterans the opportunities and services they need” to obtain employment. In March 2004, the Task Force released its report recommending needed changes to the VR&E program.

PVA is an organization of veterans who are catastrophically disabled by spinal cord injury or disease. Our members rely on the services provided by the VR&E program. The Independent Living program administered by the VR&E service is especially important to our members who must learn to perform daily living activities in the process of rehabilitating to obtain employment.

PVA fully supports the recommendations made by the VR&E Task Force report released in March 2004. In fact, our current Deputy Executive Director was a member of the Task Force. The Task Force recommended a fundamental change in how VR&E services are provided and the structures necessary to provide them. According to the report, VR&E needed to focus more on actually achieving employment for a veteran and not just on education and training. Perhaps the most important change recommended by the Task

Force was the development of the Five-Track Employment Process. The process would allow a veteran participating in the VR&E program to choose one of the following services:

- Re-employment with their previous employer.
- Rapid access to employment services with new employers.
- Self-employment.
- Long-term vocational rehabilitation services including education.
- Independent living services with the possibility of employment.

PVA, along with several other veterans service organizations, recently received a briefing from VA on the status of the VR&E service and any changes that they have made. Most notably, they have created an information video to be shown to disabled veterans that explains the VR&E service. According to the VA, this video is being shown at military installations during the conduct of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP). The video includes an explanation of the new Five-Track Employment Process and the services provided in each track.

Because many of the recommendations of the Task Force report focused on the internal workings of VR&E and on cultural changes in the service, it is difficult to judge how well the program has implemented other recommendations. Furthermore, PVA was concerned that many of our members may not have had access to the new information being put out by VA. Often, severely disabled veterans needing DTAP services fall through the cracks, especially spinal cord injured veterans who may already be getting health care and rehabilitation from a VA spinal cord injury center despite still being on active duty.

Because these individuals are no longer located on or near a military installation, they are often forgotten in the transition assistance process; thus, they do not become aware of the VR&E services available to them.

In order to get a better idea of how the VR&E program is doing at serving veterans, PVA contacted ten spinal cord injured veterans who were injured within the last two years and are eligible for VR&E services. It must be noted that the first contact that most of the veterans interviewed had with a VR&E representative was prior to the release of the Task Force report. We asked them a series of questions to assess how well the VA is doing in administering the VR&E program. The questions asked of each veteran were:

1. Are you currently enrolled in, or have you previously participated in the VA Voc Rehab program?
2. Were you contacted by VA and advised of the services available to you through the Voc Rehab program? Was any of this information made available through TAP and DTAP?
3. If you are enrolled in the program, how has your experience been and do you have any suggestions on what could be improved?
4. If you completed the program, was there any follow-up conducted by the VA?
5. Did you participate in the Independent Living program as part of Voc Rehab?
6. Were you provided with a plan that outlines the courses of action and objectives as part of your rehabilitation?
7. Were you advised of five-tracks available to you for gaining employment?

Each of the veterans contacted had initially come through a military medical facility prior to moving to a VA medical center with a spinal cord injury center. Of the ten soldiers who

received an injury, four were veterans of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) and six were injured in the line of duty at their home stations. One of the four veterans injured in OEF/OIF was a National Guard member. All of the veterans interviewed have already received a service-connected disability rating from the VA. The level of injury for each of the veterans interviewed ranged from C-6 quadriplegia to L-3 paraplegia.

Three of the veterans interviewed are currently enrolled in the VR&E program, but none of the veterans have actually completed the program. The other seven veterans were aware of the services provided by VR&E but had chosen not to participate at this time. The four OEF/OIF soldiers actually found out about the VR&E program through programs conducted at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. This was done as part of the many transition assistance programs being administered at Walter Reed. PVA believes that many, if not all, of the soldiers going through military medical facilities such as Walter Reed, Bethesda Naval Hospital, and Brooke Army Hospital have access to the best transition assistance and disabled transition assistance.

The six veterans who were injured at their home stations were transferred from the medical facilities at the military posts where they were stationed to the VA spinal cord injury centers of their choosing or nearest to their families. None of them were informed about VR&E at the military medical facilities; however, all of them explained that they had been approached about the VR&E services once they were admitted in the VA medical centers.

None of these six veterans participated in any type of TAP or DTAP program. This remains a serious concern of PVA, as I previously explained.

Two of the most recently injured veterans have actually seen the new video created by the VA that explains the services provided by the VR&E through the use of the Five-Track Employment Process. They stated that it was very informative and that it opened their minds to possibilities they had not previously considered, specifically self-employment. The veterans who chose not to participate in the VR&E program were given information on what to do if and when they decide to enroll. A couple of the veterans said they were told that VA staff would follow-up at a later date to see if their interest in VR&E services had changed.

Each of the three soldiers who are currently enrolled in the VR&E program said that their experiences were positive. They discussed what they hoped to achieve from VR&E and their counselors helped them determine what actions that they can take. All three veterans entered the VR&E program prior to the implementation of the new Five-Track Employment Process, and they indicated that they were not familiar with what this new process entailed. Each expressed interest when told that the new process would allow them to look at a variety of employment options, including self-employment. Two of the three were currently enrolled in college courses that would give them broader opportunities for employment.

The one remaining veteran is a high level quadriplegic who is currently enrolled in the Independent Living program. He explained that the Independent Living program staff has been very professional and worked with him to overcome significant challenges. He even expressed the desire to seek employment once he achieves his initial objectives outlined in his Independent Living plan.

PVA does have a couple of concerns with the Independent Living program. Currently, there is a cap—approximately 2,500—placed on the number of new Independent Living cases that the VA may take in each year. Likewise, Independent Living services can only be provided for a maximum of 30 months. We fully support the recommendation of the VR&E Task Force which calls for a study of the program to determine future demand and the types of services that may be needed. PVA believes that the ever-growing number of seriously disabled veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan could result in a significant demand for Independent Living services. The VA should not be constrained from providing services by an arbitrary cap on new cases or a limited amount of time to provide services. Many of the newly injured veterans have complex disabilities that will require long-term management and care, to include Independent Living services.

Our survey does not provide clear evidence of what changes the VA has made since the release of the VR&E Task Force report, but it does show that the VA is making an effort to make these veterans aware of services that are available. However, I must reiterate the concerns that PVA, AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, and Veterans of Foreign Wars outlined in *The Independent Budget* for FY 2006. These concerns include:

- Inadequate and sometimes non-existent case management with lack of accountability for poor decision making.
- Outdated regulations, as well as policies and procedures manuals.
- Long delays in the time taken to process applications due to staff shortages and large case loads.
- Inadequate use of electronic information technology.
- Failure to explore entrepreneurial opportunities for disabled veterans.
- Declaring veterans rehabilitated before suitable employment has been obtained.
- Inadequate and inconsistent tracking of the electronic case management information system (Corporate WINRS).
- Need for improved collaboration between the Department of Labor and the Small Business Administration.

Many of these concerns were outlined by the Task Force report, and recommendations were made to correct these deficiencies. The VA must continue to move forward to ensure that our disabled servicemen and women get critical VR&E services.

As outlined previously in our concerns about VR&E, PVA believes that it is vital that the VR&E program maintains a close partnership with the Department of Labor's (DOL) Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS). It is essential that the VA be involved in the TAP and DTAP programs administered by VETS. The DTAP program allows disabled veterans to get early exposure to the VR&E services that they are eligible for. For this reason, we recommend, in accordance with *The Independent Budget*, that the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) assign primary responsibility for the planning and administration of VA's responsibilities in the DTAP program to the VR&E service and designate a DTAP manager. Currently, the DTAP program is not consistently

administered throughout the county. It is essential that VETS and VA work this problem out so that disabled veterans get access to the vocational rehabilitation services to which they are entitled.

We support the recommendation made by the Task Force which calls for a Veterans Rehabilitation and Employment Working Group led by VA and composed of representatives of the Veterans Health Administration, VBA, VR&E, DOL-VETS, Department of Defense, and State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation. This partnership will facilitate better employment services provided across a broader spectrum for veterans. This would be especially true if a closer relationship between the Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists and VR&E staff existed.

We strongly urge the VA to put into place the important recommendations made by the VR&E Task Force. PVA looks forward to working with this Subcommittee to ensure that the VA pursues meaningful reforms to the Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment service.

I would be happy to answer any questions that you have at this time. 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.

William Carl Blake
Associate Legislative Director
Paralyzed Veterans of America
801 18th Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20006
(202) 416-7708

Carl Blake is an Associate Legislative Director with Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) at PVA's National Office in Washington, D.C. He represents PVA to federal agencies including the Department of Defense, Department of Labor, Small Business Administration, and the Office of Personnel Management. In addition, he represents PVA on issues such as homeless veterans and disabled veterans' employment as well as coordinates issues with other Veterans Service Organizations.

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 1st Brigade of the 82nd 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.