



**CONSORTIUM FOR CITIZENS  
WITH DISABILITIES**

## **Veterans Task Force**

### **2011 Annual Report**

The Veterans Task Force had an extremely busy year continuing its outreach to the veterans' and military service communities and with Congressional committees overseeing issues affecting veterans and their families. Early in the year, the task force held a briefing for its membership on the Independent Budget for the VA, a document making recommendations for the Department of Veterans Affairs that is produced annually by four major veterans' organizations and which is used by many in Congress and the Administration as guidance during the appropriations process.

The task force conducted numerous briefings and meetings with representatives of a variety of veterans' service organizations (VSOs) and military service organizations (MSOs) in an ongoing effort to communicate on issues of mutual interest. The task force helped to organize meetings between representatives of the National Military Family Association, the Military Officers Association of America, military families who have children with disabilities self-advocates and co-chairs of the Autism, Ad Hoc Medicaid, Education, Long Term Services and Supports, and Developmental Disabilities Task Forces to discuss concerns of military families with children affected by disability. Over 100,000 military families have children with special needs and face many of the same daunting education and Medicaid challenges that confront other families, but are further complicated by frequent moves related to their military service.

Multiple meetings took place between task force representatives and House and Senate VA Committee staff to familiarize them with the work of CCD and to offer the task force as a resource for issues that affect veterans as people with disabilities. In meetings with Health subcommittee staff, the task force expressed interest in the new VA caregiver program and support for HR 115, a bill to provide health insurance coverage for children of disabled veterans up to age 26 under CHAMPVA. The task force also endorsed HR 1133/S 411 the Helping our Homeless Veterans Act and HR 1154/S. 769 the Veterans Equal Treatment for Service Dogs Act. Meeting with staff for the House Economic Opportunity Subcommittee, the task force relayed its support for changes to the adaptive housing grant program to serve veterans with blindness and our interest in the notice of proposed rulemaking (NPRM) on VEVRAA. Most of these bills were incorporated into omnibus veterans' legislation packages at the end of the year. However, HR 115 failed to move because of pay-for issues and thus this omission created by the Affordable Care Act remains unresolved.

During the course of the year, the task force sent letters to the Hill in support of the Helping Our Homeless Veterans Act (S. 411/H.R. 1133), the Veterans Equal Treatment for Service Dogs Act (H.R. 1154/S. 769), the Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act (H.R. 198), and the Housing, Employment, and Living Programs for Veterans Act (H.R. 117). The task force also coordinated efforts with the US International Committee on Disability (USICD) to develop a joint sign on letter with VSOs/MSOs in support of Senate ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The task force worked with the Social Security Works Campaign in its development of an issue brief outlining the importance of Social Security to veterans and in particular veterans with disabilities. We also met with staff for Senator McCaskill regarding her deficit reduction proposal with Senator Corker that could have caused severe cuts in Social Security, Medicare and veterans benefits. The task force also worked with the CCD Fiscal Policy Task Force and the Ad Hoc Medicaid Task Force to supplement information about the impact of budget cuts on federal entitlement programs and their effect on veterans with disabilities.

The task force submitted comments on July 11 to a proposed rule governing federal contractor obligations to hire veterans and veterans with disabilities that was published for comment on April 26. To prepare for those comments we convened a briefing with representatives from OFCCP to which were invited members from the VSO and MSO communities as well as members of the Employment and Training Task Force.

The task force also submitted comments on August 15 to a proposed rule concerning VA provided benefits for veterans needing guide dogs or service dogs. The notice was officially published for comment on June 16.

The task force was invited to testify before the House Veterans Affairs Committee in June at a hearing on "Putting America's Veterans Back to Work" and again before a hearing in November of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission concerning employment barriers facing veterans with disabilities. The task force is pleased that these opportunities indicate a growing recognition of the value offered by CCD and its representation.

In July, the task force also submitted a statement for the record to the Senate HELP Committee regarding employment for veterans with disabilities. Prior to that, in June, the task force submitted comments to the Committee concerning the discussion draft of the Workforce Investment Act reauthorization to address the need to include veterans with disabilities in aspects of the legislation.

The December task force meeting featured a briefing by House VA Committee staff on the just enacted VOW to Hire Heroes Act, the major piece of employment legislation for veterans passed during the year. Several of the provisions will benefit not only service-connected disabled veterans but also veterans whose disabilities were acquired outside military service.

In 2012, the task force plans to conduct a series of briefings for the VSO and MSO communities on issues that were identified in a survey distributed among these groups in 2011. That survey indicated interest among the VSOs and MSOs in employment programs serving veterans with

disabilities beyond the traditional VA VR&E program, non-VA benefits for which veterans may qualify and how they affect VA benefits, and the degree to which health professions have embraced telehealth and other innovations for rural health care delivery.

The task force expects to review in detail a National Council on Disability report published in November on the Marine Corps Exceptional Family Member Program and its recommendations for improvements in policies concerning Medicaid transferability and special education support. Another area for exploration is the growing concern over the VA's spotty record in addressing mental health issues among veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Several issues that the task force followed during the year arose in the context of the National Defense Authorization Act, the annual defense bill. These issues included the ongoing inability of military survivor benefit plan (SBP) beneficiaries to have those benefits directed to a special needs trust and concerns over for-profit school recruitment of and services to veterans and their families. It has become clear that the task force's portfolio is expanding to encompass issues of importance to military families so we propose changing the name of the task force to Veterans and Military Families.

To better meet the needs of task force members, we also propose changing the monthly meeting time of the task force to the second Tuesday of each month, from 10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

#### Cochairs

Heather Ansley, United Spinal Association/Vets First

Bill Jefferson, NISH

Susan Prokop, Paralyzed Veterans of America

Leonard Selfon, Paralyzed Veterans of America