



## **CONSORTIUM FOR CITIZENS WITH DISABILITIES**

### **Veterans and Military Families Task Force 2014 Annual Report**

The task force followed the major pieces of legislation before the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees, focusing particular attention on omnibus measures containing provisions affecting caregivers, access to medical foster homes and access to health care beyond the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Several issues of interest to the task force fell under the jurisdiction of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, including measures affecting the ability of military family members with disabilities to set up special needs trusts and to access applied behavioral therapy under the military health care system TRICARE. The task force partnered with several other CCD task forces [Financial Security and Developmental Disabilities, Autism, and Family Support] in letters of support to Congress on these latter issues. The task force also worked with the Employment and Training Task Force in developing comments to the Department of Labor concerning the impact of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act on services to veterans with disabilities. Two measures that the task force had supported for several years were included in the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) – a) changes to Title 10 survivor benefit plans allowing recipients of those annuities to place the funds in a special needs trust in order to protect benefits they receive from other government programs; b) the Housing Assistance for Veterans Act (HAVEN) that creates a pilot program through the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to offer grants for home modifications and renovations for veterans with disabilities. In addition, the Tax Increase Prevention Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-295) included a task force-supported one-year extension of the federal incentive (Work Opportunity Tax Credit) for employers who hire veterans with disabilities and other target groups that have consistently faced significant barriers to employment.

The task force provided comments on several proposed rules published during the year. One involved the Home Improvements and Structural Alterations (HISA) grant program offered by the VA to veterans with service-connected and non-service-connected disabilities. Another Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) from the National Park Service dealt with admission of service animals into national parks.

The task force held a number of briefings and roundtables throughout the year, starting in April with a forum featuring speakers from the Office of Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) concerning implementation of the new Section 503 and VEVRAA regulations governing federal contractor obligations to recruit and hire veterans and people with disabilities. A representative from the American Clinical Laboratories Association spoke about denial of coverage for certain lab testing under TRICARE. In response, the task force sent a letter to the Department of Defense challenging this policy. In May, Dr. Marsden McGuire with VA Mental Health Services presented on the array of mental health programs offered by the VA through its clinics as well as through

partnerships with community providers. Staff from the office of Rep. Glenn Thompson addressed the task force concerning that member's bill to give individuals entering military service a mental health evaluation in addition to the pre-entrance physical exam. In June, task force representatives from several CCD organizations shared information about their association's programs for veterans with disabilities. In October, the task force received a tutorial on veterans' disability compensation by James Fischl, the Director of Field Services of Paralyzed Veterans of America. In November, Joy Ilem and Dr. Frances Murphy with Disabled American Veterans (DAV) reported on the DAV's examination of VA services for women veterans, highlighting the difficulties faced by women veterans with disabilities in receiving appropriate care.

#### Plans for 2015

The task force will continue to monitor major legislation out of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees that affect veterans with disabilities, efforts to improve DoD health care services for military family members with disabilities and implementation of the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act. The task force anticipates submitting comments early in the year on the NPRMs concerning service animals in VA facilities and expanding access to non-VA care. Members also plan to conduct additional briefings on VA benefits for veterans with disabilities, Easter Seals training program for caregivers and implementation of the Section 503/VEVRAA regulations.

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