DAV: Veterans Fighting for Veterans

By Shurhonda Love

DAV (Disabled American Veterans) is a nonprofit charity that provides a lifetime of support for veterans of all generations. Every year, we help to transform more than 1 million lives in positive ways by helping veterans gain access to the healthcare, disability, financial, housing and educational benefits they earned, and connecting them to meaningful employment opportunities. DAV is the nation’s most resourceful veteran service organization, keeping the promise of support to America’s veterans.

For nearly a century, DAV, along with its nearly 1.3 million members, has been the leader in fighting for the rights and benefits of injured and ill veterans, their families and survivors. Since our founding in 1920, DAV has upheld a reputation as a fierce advocate for veterans, working hard to ensure their earned benefits are protected through our efforts in the nation’s capital and at the local level through a robust grassroots network.

The bedrock of DAV’s hard-earned status among veterans service organizations is our strong commitment to nonpartisanship. Our legislative agenda is determined and set each year by our membership at DAV’s national convention. By remaining committed to the following issues and staying politically neutral in our advocacy efforts, we have remained both a respected partner and watchdog to Congress and the presidential administration and have continued to make positive advances in the areas deemed most critical by our members.

Veteran Caregivers

There are more than 5.5 million caregivers caring for seriously injured or ill veterans and service members, but more than 80 percent are ineligible for comprehensive caregiver benefits from VA because the veteran was injured prior to 9/11. Caregivers of veterans injured before 9/11—including WWII, Vietnam, Korea or the initial Gulf Wars—are not eligible.

The VA’s full comprehensive caregiver benefits package includes education and training, respite care and mental health services, a monthly stipend and health care coverage for the caregiver.

Studies show it’s more cost effective to support family caregivers—roughly $40,000 per year—than to put the veteran into a nursing home to receive care—between $45,000 in a state veterans home to over $300,000 in a private facility. Additionally, statistics show that disabled veterans with family caregivers can not only save taxpayers significant dollars, perhaps hundreds of thousands per year for some, but home care is also better for the veteran’s health and quality of life.

DAV is working to change laws and policies to ensure equal access for all caregivers of veterans—we call it The Unsung Heroes Initiative. We believe we must strengthen the current program to ensure veterans and their caregivers have the support they need. Congress must enact legislation to provide all severely ill and injured veterans access to comprehensive VA caregiver support services and VA must coordinate existing caregiver support services.

Women Veterans

Another key legislative priority for DAV is ensuring that women veterans have the same access to high quality health services and VA benefits as their male counterparts. Over the past decade, the number of women serving in the military has continued to rapidly increase. Over 300,000 women veterans have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, 166 made the ultimate sacrifice and more than a thousand have been wounded in action.

Today, there are more women than ever serving in the military in all occupational specialties, including combat. Yet, there are gaps in services to them, including areas of health care services, benefits, housing, education and employment and homeless assistance.

In 2014, DAV produced a landmark report on women veterans and the challenges women face when transitioning back to civilian life. It identified these gaps in the specialized needs of women service members. In that report, DAV identified its top recommendations for VA and Congress to help equalize care and services for women veterans and create a more welcoming environment within VA.

DAV’s top priorities for women veterans include: directing VA to ensure that every health care program and service has been reviewed to eliminate any barriers to access for women and ensure that it adequately addresses the unique health care needs of women veterans; ensuring building standards are reviewed and revised so that existing and future VA hospitals and clinics are designed and constructed to accommodate the needs of women veterans, including privacy concerns; and directing the Secretaries of Labor, Housing and Urban Development and Health and Human Services to work together with VA Secretary Shulkin to ensure that federal transitional services for veterans—including employment, housing, mental health and homeless prevention—are seamlessly coordinated to prevent women veterans from falling through the gaps.

Veterans Health Care Reform

Health care reform and how the Choice Program affects ill and injured veterans are among the critical issues facing America’s veterans and are a top priority for DAV. We are dedicated to ensuring veterans have access to high quality and timely health care.

For the past several years, DAV has worked closely with VA and Congress to address longstanding problems in the timely delivery of medical care to enrolled veterans. Due to staffing shortages, insufficient infrastructure and management deficiencies, too many veterans have had to wait too long or travel too far to receive health care they have earned and deserve.

Although Congress created the temporary “Choice” program in 2014 to address waiting lists and provider shortages uncovered several years ago, it has become clear that a more comprehensive approach will be necessary to achieve the next evolution of VA care. DAV has been working with VA, Congress and other VSOs to develop a plan that would create an integrated veterans’ health care network, in which VA serves at the coordinator and primary provider of care, with highly qualified community partners providing additional options to fill gaps in coverage.

We believe the four key principles for VA health care reform are: restructure, redesign, realign and reform. The concerns we have with VA health care have not been about quality—many studies show that VA care is equal to or better than private care. The prob-
lem has been about access and funding. We support creating local integrated health care networks that combine the strength of the VA system with the best of community care. Local integrated health care networks will expand veterans’ access to community care where gaps exist, while strengthening, reforming and sustaining the critical care function and capacity of the current VA system.

DAV will continue advocating for reform and modernization of the VA health care system until Congress and VA finalize, approve and implement a plan that ensures all enrolled veterans receive high-quality, veteran-focused health care, when and where they need it.

Disability Claims and Appeals Modernization

In August, DAV claimed a major victory as the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017 was signed into law, marking an important step forward in creating a more timely and accurate system for processing veterans’ appeals.

For far too long, veterans have faced unnecessary and unacceptable delays within the current VA disability appeals system, on average taking between three to five years—sometimes longer—to complete. As veterans disability claims and appeals advocacy is the hallmark service provided by DAV, we have long called for meaningful reform of the appeals system as the backlog continued to grow to more than 450,000. Since March of 2016, we have worked alongside Congress, VA, the Board of Veterans Appeals and many other stakeholders to develop and refine the new legislation.

We believe this new law will help minimize the frustration and undue burdens that veterans and their families experience when caught in a lengthy appeals process. This critical legislation will ensure that the new appeals system provides veterans with multiple options to challenge unfavorable decisions, ultimately leading to quicker and more favorable outcomes while also protecting veterans’ due process rights.

A Lifetime of Support for Veterans and Their Families

We at DAV believe that America’s 22 million veterans should get the support they were promised—it doesn’t matter when or where veterans were injured, they should be able to obtain the care and benefits they earned and deserve as a result of their military service. DAV also recognizes that veteran’s families may not have served, but they still sacrificed and should be supported as well. Each year, our claims experts assist veterans in filing more than 300,000 claims for benefits and in 2016 helped veterans and their families obtain more than $4 billion in new and retroactive benefits.

Sometimes, however, veterans need additional legal help beyond what DAV normally offers. For several years, DAV’s Charitable Service Trust has offered grant support to the Veterans Legal Clinic at Harvard Law School, in order to respond to those additional needs. The grant, which now totals $1 million to cover the entire cost of four years of veterans advocacy, has expanded its support of the clinic’s pro bono work in a number of law-practice areas, including certain state court appeals of veterans benefit denials, discharge upgrades, estate planning and combatting predatory veteran student lending. The volunteer hours involved in this pro bono work is credited as part of DAV’s Local Veterans Assistance Program, through which DAV volunteers have donated more than 4.1 million hours of service to veterans in their local communities since the program’s inception in 2007.

As an organization of veterans serving veterans, DAV takes great pride in upholding nearly 100 years of commitment to the nation’s heroes. As we receive no government funding, we are grateful to a generous American public that helps empower us to continue our mission of service and advocacy, and we look forward to another century of honoring veterans’ sacrifices through a dedicated lifetime support.

Shurhonda Love, a Dallas Texas native served in the US Army, as a 91B-W, Combat Medical Specialist for more than a decade. As a retiree from her military service, she continues to serve our Nations Veterans through her dedication in her employment with DAV. Shurhonda worked as a National Service Officer (NSO) for more than 3 years, and was promoted to Assistant Supervisor of our Utah, National Service Office. After 1 year of service in Utah, she was promoted to Supervisor of our New Orleans National Service Office, where she served 3 more years. In 2015, Shurhonda was appointed to her current position as an Assistant National Legislative Director, where she continues to exude passion in her role of building better lives for all veterans.

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