

VFW-SVA Fellows Reflect on Legislative Conference

Nine student veterans who were awarded a semester-long fellowship look back on their experience speaking to legislators and researching veteran issues

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For the past five years, the VFW has partnered with Student Veterans of America (SVA), giving student veterans an opportunity to research and promote causes that are important to veterans. In March, nine students spent one week in Washington, D.C., during the VFW's annual Legislative Conference, fulfilling an aspect of the fellowship opportunity.

Student veterans focused on one of the following four policy areas:

- Success in higher education.
- Transitioning from the military to civilian life.
- Succeeding and thriving in the civilian workforce.
- Crafting the future of veterans' health care.
- VFW magazine spoke with the 2018 fellows after their trip to Washington, D.C.

Joseph Sacco

War: Global War on Terrorism: Operation Inherent Resolve (the fight against ISIS)

Dates of deployment: October 2014 to January 2015

Service: Navy

Ship: USS Bunker Hill

Rating: Cryptologic Technician Collection

VFW affiliation: Post 2146 in Idaho Falls, Idaho

Policy topic: Improving mental health care access for veterans not currently utilizing VA health care.

"This fellowship meant a lot to me. I am very fortunate to have served in the Navy, and now I am fortunate to advocate on behalf of veterans. I have spent quite a bit

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of time trying to find some way to help other veterans, and this fellowship provided the conduit for accomplishing that goal. I want every veteran to have a voice in D.C. Don't believe that you can't make it to D.C. to pitch your idea on how to improve the lives of veterans."

Bradley Ward

War: Afghanistan

Dates of deployment: January 2014 — September 2014

Service: Army Reserve

Unit: 302nd MP Co. from Grand Prairie, Texas and the 18th Airborne Corps.

MOS: Military Police Officer

VFW affiliation: Post 4938 in Edmond, Okla.

Policy topic: Granting priority enrollment to all GI Bill users in higher education and training programs.

"It was truly a transformational experience that has definitely shaped me into both a more knowledgeable and determined advocate for our proud veteran community. The opportunity to connect and openly discuss policy and veteran-related issues with congressional leaders and department directors was an incredible experience that is certain to prepare me for future work in the field."

Ryan Rehberg

War: Iraq

Dates of deployment: 2008-2009

Service: Army

Unit: 2nd Bn., 7th Cav, 1st Cav Div.

MOS: Infantryman

VFW affiliation: Dept. of North Dakota

Policy topic: Emergency care.

"I learned to effectively advocate on veterans policy issues. Making change can be difficult, but with support and guidance from great mentors, advocating became much easier."

Jennifer Hosley

War: Global War on Terrorism

Dates of deployment: 2007 (South Korea)-2015 (Kuwait)

Service: Army

Unit: D Btry, 1st Bn., 44th Air Defense Arty, 69th Air Defense Artillery Bde., 32nd Air and Missile Defense Command

MOS: Enhanced Patriot Missile Operator/Maintainer

VFW affiliation: Post 6527 in Greenwood, Ark.

Policy topic: Military transition.

"My biggest takeaway from this experience is learning all the policies VFW and SVA work

on. I had no idea about a few of the points, but now, I feel excited to come home to Arkansas and help on a local level. This experience has certainly encouraged me to be more involved in my local VFW Post.”

Gabriel Snashall

War: Iraq and Afghanistan

Dates of deployment: 2012

Service: Navy

Ship: USS Pittsburgh

Rating: Electronic Technician 2nd Class/SS

VFW affiliation: Post 12150 in New Haven, Conn.

Policy topic: Education policy.

“[I most enjoyed the] authenticity of advocacy for a cause.

The VFW and SVA are rare: their goals are streamlined, punctual, and it shows with how respected they are on Capitol Hill. I enjoyed experiencing every second of my time with both the VFW and SVA for that reason.”

Brian Walker

War: Global War on Terrorism

Dates of deployment: July 2001 – January 2002 (supporting Operation Enduring Freedom in the North Arabian Sea/Persian Gulf); January – September 2003 (supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom near the Korean Peninsula)

Service: Navy

Ship: USS Sacramento (2001-2004)

Rating: Machinist’s Mate (1999-2003); Storekeeper (2003-07)

VFW affiliation: Post 12158 at Northeastern University in Boston

Policy topic: VA mental health access to those who have received other-than-honorable discharges.

“It was very eye-opening to see, firsthand, the amount of work that goes into advocating for addressing veterans issues. This has given me a much deeper appreciation for the work that is involved, knowing there are many who are fighting for veterans like myself.”

Francheska Salazar

War: Global War on Terrorism

Dates of deployment: September and October 2008 (Port Au Prince, Haiti), Operation Continuing Promise (2008)

Service: Navy

Unit/Ship: Destroyer Squadron 8 attached to the USS Kearsarge

Rating: Cryptologic Technician

VFW affiliation: Post 15021 in Baltimore, Md.

Policy topic: Non-retired veterans and the ability to access centralized resources that were once afforded to them while serving their country.

“I am forever indebted to everyone at the VFW and SVA for creating such a remarkable fellowship. I am humbled to have been selected and a part of this experience. Words truly cannot express my gratitude for this program. I am thrilled that I took a chance and applied and even more so that I was accepted. Thank you for making such a difference in this fellow’s life.”

Ed Tjaden

War: Iraq

Dates of deployment: 2008

Service: Army

Unit: 2nd Bde., 1st Armd. Div., Forward Operating Base Hammer, Camp Liberty and Camp Stryker

MOS: Close air support coordinator

VFW affiliation: Post 1592 in St. Peters, Mo.

Policy topic: Instituting a peer mentoring or support program within VA’s existing Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment framework.

“I enjoyed learning from the senior VFW legislative delegates and leadership while we interacted with the senators and congressmen. Their acceptance and guidance was the most amazing part of the fellowship.”

Hannah Joyce

War: Afghanistan

Dates of deployment: 2005-06 (Afghanistan), 2007 (Afghanistan), 2010 (Honduras)

Service: Air Force

Unit: Attached to the Bagram Air Base Medical Joint Force Command, and worked in the detainee facility under the 4th Infantry Division MPs (2005-06);

435th Contingency Aeromedical Staging Facility in Ramstein Germany (2007)

MOS: Aerospace medical technician

VFW affiliation: Life member of Post 15016 in Des Moines, Iowa

Policy topic: Expanding rural veteran health options and strengthening community bonds between all the stakeholders affected.

“As a [master of social work] student, this fellowship was an opportunity to observe policy in action at the national level. The social work profession emphasizes the importance of advocacy.

I hope to work with fellow veterans

in the mental health capacity as a licensed clinical social worker, and this fellowship was pivotal in gaining macro-level perspective.”

This article is featured in the 2018 June/July issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Kari Williams](#), associate editor, VFW magazine. Photo by Bob Knudsen.