

Ivy League Student Brings a Veteran's Perspective to Capitol Hill

A VFW life member who belongs to the University of Pennsylvania SVA chapter took part in advocating for veterans in March at the VFW Legislative Conference in Washington

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When Army veteran Chad Baer applied for the VFW-Student Veterans of America (SVA) fellowship last year, he already was independently working on better understanding the topic of burn pits. He was inspired to research it because of his own experiences.

While in Djibouti with the 702nd Military Police Co., 136th Military Police Bn., of the Texas Army National Guard in 2012, Baer said he was always near a trash incinerator.

“I worked nights with a small group while it was burning,” Baer said. “We worked in a remote area where the wind would blow smoke at us. We would just sit in it — it was like a haze. It would burn our eyes and throats.”

Helping and Advocating for Veterans

Baer, a life member of VFW Post 5467 in Kennett Square, Pa., said the deployment helped him understand how troops could be exposed to burn pits. His curiosity to learn more about burn pits, as well as having family members who served near burn pits in Iraq, fueled Baer's aspiration to produce a tracking method that he said would improve VA's burn pit database.

The new method proposed by Baer would involve tracking groups of veterans that had similar periods and locations of exposure. He also wants relevant data added from registering veterans to better identify all veterans, not just ones who voluntarily add their name to the burn pit registry.

Baer said implementing this method for tracking veterans exposed to burn pits would spare “tens of thousands” from suffering, much like Vietnam War veterans who waited years to

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secure treatment and benefits from Agent Orange exposure.

A graduate student, Baer is working on a master's degree in public administration, which he hopes to obtain next year. When he isn't studying or attending class at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, Baer volunteers as a treasurer for The Veterans Group, a nonprofit organization that provides shelter, food and services to veterans near Philadelphia.

"Volunteering for The Veterans Group is a growing experience," Baer said. "It's something that challenges me. It gives me some immediate gratification because I get to see the everyday impact of keeping veterans off the street. With my burn pit work, it may take years to save a lot of lives or alleviate a lot of suffering."

Making a Difference on Capitol Hill

The VFW Legislative Conference in March was Baer's first visit to Capitol Hill. He said he didn't expect how "accessible" congressional staff members were going to be during the fellowship.

"I was able to just walk around Capitol Hill and visit offices to talk with staff members," Baer said. "I made a lot of good connections with staffers of Congress members on the House and Senate VA committees. I've been in contact with some since the fellowship visit to DC."

Baer met with several people, including Sen. Jon Tester (D-Mont.), Rep. Mark Takano (D-Calif.), VA Deputy Secretary Thomas Bowman and Drew Trojanowski, special advisor to the president on domestic policy. Baer said he made "strong" connections with the other nine student veteran fellows and VFW staff members during the VFW Legislative Conference.

"The fellowship was excellent," Baer said. "I can't speak highly enough about my experience. We had a really great cohort of fellows, and I got to meet a lot of good people from my state. The whole itinerary of the event made for a great experience."

Baer said he liked what VFW's Washington staff does for veterans. "It was impressive to witness the clout of the VFW," Baer said. "I got to sit in on the VFW Chief's testimony before the House and Senate committees and see what issues are covered. I wasn't aware of the advocacy work that VFW does for all veterans, including the younger generation."

This article is featured in the 2019 June/July issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.