

Student Vets Fight for Veterans' Benefits on Capitol Hill

A VFW Life member and law student was one of five student veterans selected to be part of the VFW Fellowship program in Washington, D.C.

Sep 01, 2022

Since 2013, members of VFW and the Student Veterans of America, or SVA, have had the opportunity to make their voices heard on Capitol Hill.

This year, five student veterans were selected to be part of the VFW-SVA Fellowship program, which gave them a platform to advocate alongside VFW representatives on issues facing veterans. Fellows get to meet the nation's lawmakers and administrators responsible for implementing veterans' policy in the nation's capital.

This year's Fellows were:

- James-Anthony Burandt, Marine Corps, California State University-Fullerton
- Thomas Fischer, Army, Syracuse University
- Natalie Koffarnus, Army, Montana Tech of the University of Montana
- Alex Ortiz, Army, Rhode Island State College
- John Randolph, Air Force, Pennsylvania State University

Then-VFW Commander-in-Chief Matthew M. "Fritz" Mihelcic said the 2022 VFW-SVA fellowship provided veterans the chance to "hone their advocacy skills" for issues directly related to veterans across the country.

"Keeping our veterans, the military and their families in the forefront of legislators' minds is paramount," Mihelcic said. "Now more than ever, veteran representation on Capitol Hill matters."

Each student completed an essay that proposed legislative improvements to one of the following veterans' issues:

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

- Student veteran success in higher learning and jobs
- Veterans' health care and earned benefits
- The transition from military to civilian life
- Challenges facing service members and their families

Ortiz, who during the fellowship attended Rhode Island College in Providence, graduated in May with a bachelor's degree in accounting. He currently is working on obtaining a law degree from Puerto Rico's Inter American University.

Ortiz, who medically retired from active duty in 2013 after seven years of service, said his proposal for the fellowship was changing a provision in the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The bill, which was signed into law in 2008 after years of VFW advocacy, gives its beneficiaries 15 years to use the higher education benefits. Ortiz, a Life member of VFW Post 10011 in Providence, said he wants to change that.

"They could have done better with writing the bill," Ortiz said. "They needed to think about some of the situations that are happening now before they write laws that affect veterans' benefits."

Ortiz said the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a lot of student veterans to postpone their education, which he adds could lead to the veterans not being able to use the fully-earned benefits. For Ortiz, the inspiration for his interest in the GI Bill came from a friend. His friend's experience caused Ortiz to fix the 15-year provision in the GI Bill.

"He got a notice from the VA saying that he had 22 months left on his GI Bill benefits," Ortiz said. "He thought he didn't have any benefits left, but he still received the notice."

It was VA's error, he claims.

Ortiz said his friend moved his family to start a new semester of school. However, at the end of the semester, the school told his friend that the GI Bill benefits expired.

"So then he had a bunch of debt, and there was no way for him to cover his household expenses," the Iraq and Afghanistan war vet said. "He was counting on that housing allowance."

Ortiz — who served in Iraq in 2008 and 2009 and Afghanistan from 2010 to 2011 with the 10th Mountain Division — said the bill he proposed will allow anyone who earned the GI Bill and served after Dec. 10, 2001, (which is 90 days after Sept. 11) would be able to keep their GI Bill benefits longer than the current limit.

Ortiz said working with the VFW Washington Office was an "amazing" experience.

“It was a learning process for me on how bills are negotiated and made, as well as what VFW does for veterans,” Ortiz said. “I was very grateful for the experience. At first, I didn’t know the VFW was so involved with the legislative work in Washington. If you were to ask me two years ago what the VFW is, I would have said, ‘It’s somewhere veterans hang out and have a beer.’”

Ortiz added that the whole VFW-SVA fellowship program was “eye-opening” for him.

“The amount of support and resources that the VFW has to change the veterans’ lives for the better boggled my mind,” Ortiz said. “It was a whole new world that opened up to me.”

SVA student veterans interested in the fellowship can get more information about the program by visiting <https://studentveterans.org/programs/vfw-sva-legislative-fellowship>.

This article is featured in the 2022 August issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiwa](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.