

VFW Offers Legislative Platform for Veterans

On Capitol Hill, the VFW's voice is heard loud and clear so here's a look at how the VFW's National Legislative Service team gets it done.

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Mere steps from the U.S. Capitol is VFW's Washington Office. The National Legislative Service (NLS) staff keeps the sidewalks hot as they advocate on behalf of not only VFW's and its Auxiliary's nearly 1.7 million members, but of all veterans, service members, their families and survivors.

The staff of six monitors all legislation affecting the military and veterans communities by testifying up to 33 times each year at congressional committee hearings and interacting directly with Congress and the administration to accomplish [VFW's annual priority goals](#).

As director of VFW's National Legislative Service, Carlos Fuentes is excited to go to work each morning to help safeguard against "bad" Congressional proposals that could potentially erode or eliminate earned veterans benefits.

"I am honored to be involved in one of the many important programs the VFW operates which makes a significant difference in the lives of veterans across the country," said Fuentes, a life member of VFW Post 5627 in College Park, Md. "NLS leverages the power of the VFW's membership to advance federal legislation which has a direct impact on countless veterans."

Prior to his current position with VFW, in which he began in October 2014, Fuentes was a legislative staffer for the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs.

The Afghanistan vet who served six years in the Marine Corps said he enjoys seeing veterans reap the benefits of the hard work put in by the NLS staff.

For example, he noted that there are veterans who are now able to have families because

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VFW worked to ensure VA provides fertility treatments or adoption reimbursements. Other legislative wins include veterans who can pursue their post-military educational goals because they had their education benefits restored by the Forever GI Bill after their school abruptly closed.

“Knowing that our collective hard work on behalf of VFW members touches the lives of millions of veterans, service members and their families throughout the country is extremely rewarding,” Fuentes said. “And it’s the reason I’m excited to come to work every morning.”

For Ann Markel, NLS office manager, the best part of her job is knowing she helps reassure veterans.

“We receive calls from veterans who are concerned and even fearful about veteran’s issues they are reading and hearing about in the news,” said Markel, who came to VFW in 2008. “To have someone say, ‘Thank you for talking to me. I will be able to sleep tonight,’ is a reminder that what we do impacts the quality of veterans lives.”

Veterans ‘Aren’t Alone’

For Kayda Keleher, a Marine Corps vet who served in Afghanistan in 2011, taking care of others is a top priority.

“Some of the problems happening in veterans’ lives are really heart-wrenching stories that have a clearly negative impact on their lives,” said Keleher, also a member of Post 5627. “When we can tell them that they aren’t alone, and that we’re here in Washington fighting for them, hearing the sincere joy in their voices always brings a smile to my face and makes me proud.”

Before coming to VFW in 2016, Keleher had volunteered at a business which aims to highlight art therapy for those who have PTSD and TBI.

She also was a research coordinator at American University in Washington, D.C., working as the link between veterans and various studies.

As an NLS associate director, Keleher testifies on behalf of VFW on matters such as VA health care and homeless benefits for veterans. She testified seven times in the past year alone.

Keleher said her work as a Marine Corps combat correspondent in Afghanistan and her work prior to coming to VFW prepared her for Capitol Hill.

“When I was deployed, I worked primarily with women and children in Afghanistan,” Keleher said. “Later, I worked as a refugee liaison for women refugees in Buffalo, N.Y. It was really rewarding work, much like my work here at VFW.”

NLS Work ‘Never Gets Old’

NLS Associate Director Ken Wiseman said he handles several duties for VFW. He is the in-house expert on issues relating to toxic exposure, the VA budget and the congressional appropriations process, as well as rural veterans and their specific health care needs.

He also manages VFW’s Action Corps, which is a grassroots communications tool with more than 300,000 members.

A life member of Post 1503 in Dale City, Va., Wiseman is the lead staffer for the VFW-Student Veterans of America Legislative Fellowship (see sidebar on p. 26). Wiseman came to VFW after being a fellow in the first class in 2015. He also is the VFW Department of Virginia senior vice commander.

“Working on toxic exposure issues like Agent Orange, burn pits and Gulf War Syndrome is most rewarding,” said Wiseman, who earned his VFW eligibility aboard the USS Samuel B. Roberts off South America.

“Because of my specific duties while in the Navy, I am able to talk about these issues from the scientific aspect as well as the need for policy change.”

Wiseman is no stranger to testifying or holding press events on the steps of Capitol Hill to make sure VFW’s voice is heard. Last July, he spoke in support of a congressional amendment that would declassify portions of a Vietnam-era project that exposed approximately 6,000 troops to deadly chemical and biological agents.

“I can tell you it never gets old,” said Wiseman in reference to his work with VFW. “I catch myself looking at the Capitol building every time I pass it. But I always focus on the task at hand and put the needs of veterans, our members, and our organization ahead of my awe, because we don’t need tourists in this business — we need advocates.”

Members Make Biggest Impact

A life member of Post 3150 in Arlington, Va., Patrick Murray began working at VFW in September 2016. He came to VFW from FourBlock, a company that specializes in helping

veterans find careers after their military service.

Murray, who served with the 1st Bn., 25th Marines in Iraq in 2006, works legislative issues affecting economic opportunities for veterans, such as home loans and veteran-owned small businesses.

He also is VFW's in-house expert on veterans treatment courts, education, employment and transitioning from the military.

Like the rest of the NLS staff, Murray frequently gives lawmakers VFW's position on veteran-related bills. He has testified on everything from the S.798 Yellow Ribbon Improvement Act to H.R. 2749 Protecting Business Opportunities for Veterans Act of 2017.

"The most rewarding part of my time at VFW is seeing how change positively affects service members and veterans," said the combat-wounded Marine.

Another member of VFW's Washington Office, John Towles, is the newest member of VFW's NLS staff. He arrived in May 2017, and says his passion for the work is just as strong as the rest of the staff.

A member of Post 3150 in Arlington, Va., Towles said it can be challenging to bridge the gap between what a piece of legislation should do in theory, and how it will affect not only VFW's members, but in many cases, all veterans, service members and their families.

"When we testify before Congress about important issues or pending legislation," Towles said, "we are doing more than just giving the opinion of the members we represent. We are bringing faces, names and real-world experiences to the members of Congress sitting behind the dais."

Towles served as a combat medic in Mosul, Iraq, from 2005 to 2006, and in Helmand and Kandahar provinces from 2009 to 2010. As a result of combat injuries that he sustained in Afghanistan, he was medically retired in 2012.

At VFW, Towles, NLS deputy director, monitors the congressional subcommittees that deal with disability assistance and memorial affairs, military readiness, and military personnel.

Towles noted that while VFW weighs in on virtually every piece of legislation pertaining to veterans, it's the members' voices that make the most impact.

"The amount of weight that VFW carries is phenomenal," he said. "It is one thing if John Towles calls over to a senator or representative and explains our position on a topic or a bill. But it is even more impactful when VFW members also contact their own members of Congress to express the same sentiment."

It is that two-pronged approach that makes VFW's legislative efforts so effective. And as long as VFW exists, the organization's Washington Office vows to keep leading that effort.

This article is featured in the February 2018 issue of [VFW magazine](#) and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor, VFW magazine. Photo by Lauren Goldman/VFW.