

LEGISLATIVE BULLETIN

December 2008

Shinseki Nominated for Secretary of Veterans Affairs

On December 8, 2008, President-Elect Barack Obama nominated General Eric K. Shinseki, Retired Army Chief of Staff, to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

General Shinseki graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1965 with a Bachelor of Science Degree. He served two tours of duty in Vietnam, where he was wounded in combat, losing part of his foot when he stepped on a land mine. General Shinseki had a long and distinguished Army career, including receipt of the Defense Distinguished Service Medal, the Legion of Merit (with Oak Leaf Clusters), the Bronze Star Medal with "V" Device (with 2 Oak Leaf Clusters), among many other decorations.

On December 10, 2008, Senator Daniel Akaka (D-HI) announced that Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee will hold a confirmation hearing for General Shinseki on January 14, 2009. We will keep you updated through our web site.

Filner Reelected as Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee

On November 20, 2008, the House Democratic Caucus voted to re-elect Congressman Bob Filner (D-CA) as Chair of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Filner will serve his second term as Chairman in the upcoming 111th Congress, which begins on January 6, 2009.

Filner commented: "I am grateful to my Democratic colleagues for supporting me as Chair of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. It is truly an honor and a privilege to serve our nation's veterans and I appreciate the support of the Caucus. We made significant progress in caring for our veterans over the past two years, but much remains to be done. A new basis of stable funding must be developed. The claims backlog must be attacked in a new way. And the mental health of our veterans – both old and new – must remain a high priority."

The DAV looks forward to working with Chairman Filner, along with other veterans' advocates on both Veterans' Affairs Committees, in forwarding our legislative priorities during the 111th Congress.

Akaka Renamed Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee

On December 15, 2008, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) announced his recommendations for Chairmanships in the 111th Congress. Senator Daniel K. Akaka (D-HI) was renamed Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. The DAV had already begun talking to his staff about the reintroduction of legislation that failed to pass in the 110th Congress.

Summary of DAV Legislative Activities

During the second and third quarters of 2008, DAV continued researching and developing proposals and recommendations for improvements to current federal policies supporting disabled veterans, especially those from Iraq and Afghanistan. Throughout 2008, DAV has seen its recommendations turned into legislative action by Congress, particularly in the areas of mental health and caregiver assistance. As we have reported in previous bulletins, the DAV has participated in numerous legislative hearings, delivering expert testimony at 27 hearings during the second session of the 110th Congress.

As reported on our DAV website, On September 18, 2008, the "Veterans Health Care Budget Reform Act" was introduced by Senator Daniel Akaka, Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, and Congressman Bob Filner, Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, in their respective chambers. This legislation embodies the ideas that DAV has been researching for the past year. The legislation would authorize a one-year advance appropriation for veterans medical care programs to assure sufficient, timely and predictable funding.

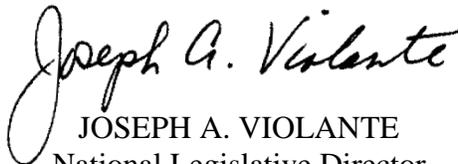
The broad bipartisan support that the legislation received at introduction this year, including backing from both Senator Barack Obama and Senator John McCain, indicates a good prospect for success next year. The proposal was supported by the Partnership for Veterans Health Care Budget Reform, a coalition of nine veterans service organizations (including DAV) with over 8 million members. The legislation has also been endorsed by The Military Coalition, comprised of 35 organizations representing more than 5.5 million members of the uniformed services--active, reserve, retired, survivors, veterans and their families. In addition, a growing list of former VA medical center directors, regional healthcare network directors, Under Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries, and other senior VA officials have joined together to support the proposed funding reform.

DAV continued researching and developing new program and policy proposals to improve the screening, diagnosis and treatment of traumatic brain injury (TBI), which according to a new Rand study released earlier this year, has afflicted hundreds of thousands of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans. DAV presented recommendations during testimony at two different Congressional hearings during the second and third quarters of 2008. By the close of the third quarter, Congress had approved, and the President signed, legislation (S. 2162) supported by DAV in testimony to create "Epilepsy Centers of Excellence" to coordinate research, diagnosis clinic care and education for traumatic brain injury and epilepsy, two conditions that are medically linked. Epilepsy often results from a traumatic brain injury.

During the second and third quarters of 2008, DAV continued to build upon its expanded public awareness and education efforts, particularly focusing on developing greater media interest in stories supporting the four tracks of the initiative. DAV continued to develop paid print and web advertising to increase public awareness of the need for Congressional action to strengthen public policies for veterans health care, particularly funding reform.

DAV's "Stand Up For Veterans" public awareness campaign continued to be promoted on its dedicated website (www.standup4vets.org), as well as through a dedicated MySpace website page (www.myspace.com/standup4vets) and through a dedicated page on YouTube (www.youtube.com/standupforveterans) containing short videos produced by DAV. The latest video released during the third quarter focused on family caregivers and how their needs are not being met. The video was shared not only through YouTube, but also through MySpace, FaceBook, as well as by dissemination to a number of military and veteran blogs on the web. In addition, DAV continued producing and distributing an e-Newsletter ("StandUpdate") to educate Members of Congress, their staffs, and tens of thousands of DAV members and veteran activists about the health care needs of severely disabled veterans along the four tracks of this initiative.

DAV also saw a great increase in the level of awareness about and interaction with its "Stand Up For Veterans" website and associated MySpace page. The "Stand Up" website (www.standup4vets.org) had over 73,000 unique visitors in the third quarter and more than 500,000 total website "hits" during that period. During September, the number of unique visitors increased to approximately 1,000 per day. Over 6,900 grassroots activists visited the site and signed up to receive future information updates on the issues of this initiative. In addition, approximately 660 persons shared their "stories" with DAV through the "Stand Up" website, to help educate others on the needs of returning veterans and their families. The number of "Stand Up For Veterans" MySpace "friends" has grown to 480 and there have now been a total of 3,554 visits to that site, with 1,209 "Blog" visits (separate from main page visits).


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