Make Your Voice Heard, and Make the Law

As the 113th Congress begins its work, our members should redouble their efforts to support DAV’s legislative priorities with their elected representatives in Washington. More is required than a single letter, telegram, email or phone call. It is regular, recurring contact with both your Representatives’ local and Washington offices. And there are crucial times when personal contact means the most.

One of the keys to becoming an effective advocate is timing your contact with lawmakers with the progress of the legislation; but anytime is a good time to start talking with them. Even before a bill is introduced you can plant the seed of our legislative initiatives in the minds of those who pass our laws. Your contact with the local and Washington offices of your Representative or Senator should discuss the idea for legislation and, if they agree, give them ideas on how it should be done and can be written.

If a bill on one of our legislative issues has been proposed, even if it was not proposed by your representative, call to get your Representative or Senator to co-sponsor it. Once a bill has a sponsor it is ready to be introduced, but additional co-sponsors are always welcome. Your advocacy or opposition to the proposal can greatly affect how or whether it proceeds.

All new bills go into a hopper, where they are given consecutive numbers and then read into the Congressional Record. At that point, the Parliamentarian sends the bill to the appropriate committee—usually in our case it’s Veterans’ Affairs or Appropriations. At this point, there is again an opportunity to contact your legislators and the committee urging their support for our legislative initiative.
When the bill reaches a committee, it is reviewed, researched and revised. The committee closely examines it and calls in expert opinions, including DAV’s, before it is ready for committee action. Depending on the changes made, our members—through contact with their lawmakers—have another opportunity to advocate for the bill if it remains to their satisfaction, or to oppose it if the bill has been altered to adversely affect veterans.

Next, the committee members formally vote on the bill, and if approved, it goes to the full House of Representatives or Senate, where it can be offered for debate. Once again, our members have the opportunity to influence the outcome through contacts with their elected representatives.

Often when a bill is debated, it can again undergo changes that could help or harm veterans, so being watchful of the legislation is crucial. That’s where our Commander’s Action Network (DAV CAN) proves to be a superb advocating tool. Our DAV CAN members receive e-mails from DAV explaining the status of the biDAV CAN emails usually include suggested pre-written letters that can be sent directly to the elected representatives. It is important for you to join DAV CAN, and to use it.

Once a bill is placed on the House or Senate calendar, it then can be voted on. In the days prior to a vote, our members have another opportunity to contact their elected representatives. Giving your lawmakers the word on how to vote can have a tremendous effect on legislation affecting veterans.

If approved by one chamber of Congress, the bill is forwarded to the other to begin the process anew. When a bill has been approved by both the House and Senate, it sometimes undergoes a conference process by a panel of Representatives and Senators to reconcile differences between the two versions. While the reconciliation debate is handled primarily by the conference appointees, your elected representatives, who may
not be part of this process, can still influence panel members and their staffs.

Once through the conference committee, the compromise bill is again voted on by the House and Senate, and the time to advocate for the bill presents itself again. If approved by both sides, it goes to the President, and then the time comes to advocate for the bill with the White House. If the President approves the bill, it finally becomes law.

It is a long process, but it’s called representative government. You have a stake in decisions at each point, and you have many opportunities to influence how our laws are made. Each step of the process gives us the chance to see meaningful veterans legislation passed and signed into law.

Our Washington Headquarters Legislative staff tracks hundreds of bills and proposals through this process each Congress. Some bills become law, but many more die due to lack of support, or because they are bad ideas. Dozens of bills that would have greatly benefited the lives of our veterans languished when Congress adjourned late last year.

Justice delayed is justice denied. There’s no way to tell if more contacts by our members with Congress would have made a difference, but some of these bills that could have become law affected concurrent receipt, mental health, expanded VA health care and increased compensation.

Clearly the effort is worth it. If you have a computer and are not in DAV CAN, you should sign up by going to the DAV website (www.dav.org) or by contacting my office. That’s the first step in becoming a veterans advocate. Our organization is a powerful group of veterans helping veterans, and members of Congress are aware of that fact. They pay attention to what DAV and our members say.

It’s what you say to your elected representatives that means our success. Our small staff does a magnificent job in
representing DAV in Washington, but we can’t do it alone. With 1.2 million empowered advocates behind us, we can create an even more imposing force to do what is right for injured and ill veterans.