

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Witness Testimony

STATEMENT OF HARLEY THOMAS, ASSOCIATE LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES CONCERNING THE DISABLED SPORTSMEN'S ACCESS ACT MAY 14, 1998

Chairman Saxton, and Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) it is an honor to participate in today's hearing. PVA appreciates this opportunity to express our views on the "Disabled Sportsmen's Access Act."

PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS FACILITATES REHABILITATION

Over fifty years ago the original founders of the Paralyzed Veterans of America, (PVA) came together in a united front to advocate participation in organized sports as an enhancement to rehabilitation. Veterans suffering traumatic spinal cord injury began playing wheelchair basketball and discovered they didn't have to be spectators, they could participate and in doing so, enhance their quality of life.

Today some fifty-one years later, PVA continues to support and promote organized wheelchair sports for disabled veterans. Together with the Department of Veterans Affairs, the annual Veterans Wheelchair Games, brings together over 500 of the best wheelchair athletes in the nation for organized competition. This is the largest organized wheelchair-sporting event in the world. Although the veterans wheelchair games is a true success story, it only accommodates a small number of the over 78,000 disabled veterans suffering from traumatic spinal cord injury or dysfunction, and a mere fraction of the estimated 9,000,000 veterans classified as disabled.

PVA launched the annual U.S. Open Bass Tournament for disabled anglers in 1987. This event was expanded into the "Bass Trail" which consists of 5 to 6 events annually, in 1994. Each of these exciting events held at various locations around the country, draws between 70 - 75 disabled anglers.

In 1988, PVA launched a Trap Shoot for disabled individuals. This event has prospered over the years and this year was expanded to five different locations. Each of these events draws from 60 - 75 participants. The rules for disabled trap shooting are the same as for able-bodied individuals.

OUTDOOR RECREATION NUMBER ONE

Outdoor recreational facilities and opportunities are extremely important to veterans and all individuals with disabilities. In a 1996 survey conducted by PVA, we found that the number one recreational activity for our

members was fishing, followed closely by hunting and all other outdoor recreational activities in general. Unfortunately the numbers of accessible outdoor recreational facilities are extremely limited. Many local municipalities simply do not have the funds available to provide adequate outdoor recreation facilities.

The Marine base at Quantico, Virginia has taken steps to ensure accessibility to outdoor recreation facilities by disabled individuals. This program has been extremely successful. Former Marine Larry Gerlach says, "I'm not much of a spectator sports fan, but I really love hunting and fishing. It's more fun doing than watching. The program at Quantico, which allows actual doing, is a godsend. If it can be expanded nationwide, I know it will be enjoyed by many other handicapped individuals who can then enjoy the physical and mental pleasure it offers."

This program needs to be expanded nation-wide to all military installations, providing maximum availability of quality outdoor recreation facilities to disabled veterans and others with disabilities.

The enactment of H.R. 2760 can provide a solution to this problem. Most military bases have ongoing outdoor recreation facilities to include fishing, hunting, boating, camping, and many other desirable activities. The Department of Defense is already required to provide access for qualified individuals with disabilities in all of its programs, by virtue of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (38 CFR § 15.149-150 (1997)). However, full implementation has been hampered by lack of resources. The ability to use volunteers and donations to make recreation areas accessible will greatly increase the implementation of these existing regulations.

By making these facilities accessible to disabled veterans, military dependents and other persons with disabilities, they would have access to the over 30,000,000 acres, much of which is prime hunting grounds. Utilization of these facilities can enrich the quality of life for many disabled individuals.

Through the use of volunteers and donations of time and materials, costs associated with converting existing outdoor activities to accommodate disabled individuals will be minimal. PVA has a staff of expert architects that are leaders in the field of disability and ADA standards. PVA would be happy to provide technical assistance to any military installation interested in providing accessible outdoor recreation facilities to the disabled community.

PVA would like to extend a special "thank you" to Congressman "Duke" Cunningham for his introduction of this vital piece of legislation and the positive impact it will have on the disabled community.

Mr. Chairman, PVA urges the passage of H.R. 2760. Thank you for holding this important hearing, it shows your concern for the needs of disabled veterans. Mr. Chairman this concludes my testimony. I will be happy to respond to any questions you or members of the committee may have.

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