



Student Vets Advocate on Capitol Hill

The newest VFW-SVA fellows are ready to support veterans in any way they can

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The 2024-2025 VFW-SVA Fellowship has concluded, and another generation of talented student veterans are ready for change.

Since 2014, the VFW and Student Veterans of America Fellowship Program has helped student veterans better understand the process behind advocating for veteran-friendly legislation and allows for student veterans to work closely with lawmakers responsible for maintaining veteran's policy.

Each year, VFW selects the fellows from SVA's ranks as part of the two groups' partnership.

The fellows get hands-on experience advocating for veteran legislation both at the national and local levels, get more involved with the VFW and make lasting connections with each other.

'THERE'S POWER IN NUMBERS'

Over the course of the nine-month schedule, the fellows learned more about policy, often focusing on the G.I. Bill, and how to develop grassroots advocacy in their local settings.

"We spend around six months just learning about policy, with an emphasis on local policy." said Terry Traylor, a Marine Corps veteran, VFW member of Post 7564 in West Fargo, North Dakota, and one of this year's fellows.

Each of the fellows worked in designated regions of the U.S., with Traylor being involved with the Midwest, specifically the Dakotas. There, Traylor worked closely with senators and other government officials, advocating for better policy for veterans.

To keep the VFW close by, Traylor often worked in town halls so Posts could be more easily involved with the advocacy process.

While there was much vocal advocacy during the fellowship, Traylor also was involved with

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digital efforts such as building infographics that went into detail about certain policies, as well as creating a class that teaches how to advocate digitally.

Each year, the VFW-SVA fellows get the chance to participate in the Washington Conference — a time for student veterans to have their voices heard by elected officials in the nation’s capital. The fellows, along with getting the chance to inform officials in D.C. of the student veteran experience, also get to show their size and influence.

“There’s power in numbers,” said Traylor. “Imagine shooting a small firearm, that would be me going by myself. When we’re with the rest of the VFW, however, we’re a whole artillery.”

Traylor describes his approach to veterans as “guerilla” — building close, interpersonal relationships. While being an active SVA member, he also plans on being an active VFW member, advocating for policy at the local level in North Dakota.

Through his experience with the fellowship, Traylor developed a 5k memorial fundraiser for 9/11 deployers and their families.

‘A PHENOMENAL PROGRAM’

Jennifer Ross, an Air Force veteran who served for more than 20 years, also was a member of this year’s fellowship. She is a member of VFW Post 1503 in Montclair, Virginia. Although she had been involved with the SVA since graduate school, she did not have much experience with the VFW. Now, after graduating from the fellowship, she’s more than eager to get involved with her local VFW Post.

Having served as a Russian linguist and in human intelligence for the Air Force, Ross went on to collect multiple master’s degrees, including a master’s in business administration.

When she signed on to join the fellowship, she wasn’t sure what to expect.

Through her time with the VFW-SVA fellowship, Ross learned that “There is a need for people to be in the federal government who keep organizations like the SVA and VFW active.”

She was impressed with the VFW’s initiative, and how both the VFW and SVA seamlessly combined their organizations.

“I was most grateful for the kind of dual nature of it,” Ross said. “It wasn’t just the SVA or the VFW. I liked how closely they worked to create a phenomenal program. Each piece offered such a unique viewpoint on how they individually handled policy.”

Originally from Virginia, Ross now lives in Maryland and is excited to find her new VFW Post. She was impressed with how the VFW handled themselves in D.C. and hopes to

support veterans alongside them.

“The legislative team at the VFW, I connected with them and thought they were all phenomenal people,” she said. “I’m excited to work with them going forward.”

Ross is currently enrolled in a master’s program for public policy at Georgetown University. She works closely with HillVets — a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C. — that helps guides veterans to careers working in the government. She says she is passionate about education, specifically education for veterans.

‘CHALLENGING, YET REWARDING’

Another VFW-SVA fellow, Army veteran Casey Stege, plans to use the experience he gained from the fellowship to inform his future career as an attorney.

“I was exposed to so many inspiring veterans and veteran-friendly businesses and organizations that are doing an incredible job of caring for our soldiers,” said Stege, a member of VFW Post 2148 in Waco, Texas.

Through the fellowship, Stege gained a deeper appreciation of veteran service organizations along with a deepened understanding of legislation that can go towards benefiting veterans.

“It was challenging for sure,” Stege said when asked about the process of advocating for veteran-friendly policy. “Knowing where to start, then putting yourself out there to try and get the importance of the legislation across was challenging yet rewarding. Thankfully, the VFW mentors were incredible and quite helpful.”

‘MY TIME IN D.C. WAS IMPACTFUL’

Last fall, while enrolled in the VFW-SVA Fellowship, Army veteran Polina Washington was taking a graduate course on language pedagogy. One of her assignments was to create an infographic on a topic of her choice. She used the fellowship as inspiration to create an informative, but accessible infographic about the G.I. Bill Parity Act.

“The process of creating (the infographic) also had me think of how I would ‘pitch’ this legislation to various people, just as those it does or doesn’t concern, to get everyone to support the act,” said Washington, an at-large VFW Member.

During her week in D.C. this past March, Washington had a chance to sharpen skills that are needed when advocating for policy. Getting to work with “the pros” as she says, Washington was paired up with VFW National Legislative Committee Chairman Mitch Fuller and got to see him in action.

“I had been to Washington, D.C., before, in the capacity of a tourist, but getting to walk the halls where decision makers can influence what may affect their towns, cities and states

made me feel that my time in D.C. was truly impactful,” Washington said.

Washington is still on active duty and was on track to graduate from the University of Texas with a master’s in Russian, East European and Eurasian studies in May 2025. Her next goal is to teach Russian at the United States Military Academy at West Point, and she hopes to maintain strong relationships with both the VFW and SVA.

‘PEOPLE ARE GOING TO LISTEN’

The Fellowship had a profound effect on Army Veteran Jose Ayon, who was able to work alongside the California VFW legislative team while in Washington, D.C. During his time in the nation’s capital, Ayon, a member of VFW Post 67 in Sacramento, Calif., was able to feel the influence his voice carried.

“When you’re in a room with your team, people are going to listen,” Ayon said when asked about his Washington Conference experience. “You feel the power of your voice.”

Ayon is currently pursuing a master’s of Public Administration degree at the University of Southern California and works for the California Department of Veteran Affairs.

“VFW is an amazing organization that does so much,” Ayon said. “It’s definitely something this fellowship and the team instilled in me.”

Feeling accomplished and experienced, each of the VFW-SVA Fellows are ready to assist veterans in any way they can.

Whether it is at the local or at the federal level, they will make sure their voices, and the voices of all veterans, are heard.

This article is featured in the 2025 July/August issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Danny Cook](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.