

Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is the only national Vietnam veterans organization congressionally chartered and exclusively dedicated to Vietnam-era veterans and their families.

By the late 1970s, it was clear the established veterans groups had failed to make a priority of the issues of concern to Vietnam veterans. As a result, a vacuum existed within the nation's legislative and public agenda. In January 1978, a small group of Vietnam veteran activists came to Washington, D.C., searching for allies to support the creation of an advocacy organization devoted exclusively to the needs of Vietnam veterans. VVA, initially known as the Council of Vietnam Veterans, began its work. At the end of its first year of operation in 1979, the total assets were \$46,506.

Council members believed that if the nation's attention was focused on the specific needs of Vietnam veterans, a grateful nation would quickly take remedial steps. However, despite persuasive arguments before Congress, which were amplified by highly supportive editorials printed in many leading American newspapers, they failed to win even a single legislative victory to bring new and needed programs into creation to help Vietnam veterans and their families.

It soon became apparent that arguments couched simply in terms of morality, equity, and justice were not enough. The U.S. Congress would respond to the legitimate needs of Vietnam veterans only if the organization professing to represent them had political strength. In this case, strength translated into numbers which meant membership. By the summer of 1979, the Council of Vietnam Veterans had transformed into Vietnam Veterans of America, a veterans service organization made up of, and devoted to, Vietnam veterans.

Hindered by the lack of substantial funding for development, the growth of membership was at first slow. The big breakthrough came when the American hostages were returned from Iran in January 1981. It was as if America went through an emotional catharsis that put the issues of the Vietnam era on the table for public discussion. The question was asked why parades for the hostages but not for Vietnam veterans? Many veterans complained about the lack of recognition and appreciation for past national service. Vietnam-era veterans wanted action in the form of programs that would place the latest generation of veterans on the same footing as veterans from previous wars.

Membership grew steadily, and for the first time, VVA secured significant contributions. The combination of the public's willingness to talk about the Vietnam War and the basic issues that it raised, as well as the veterans themselves coming forward, was augmented by the nation's dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in November 1982. The week-long activities rekindled a sense of brotherhood among the veterans and a feeling that they shared an experience that was too significant to ignore.

In 1983, VVA took a significant step by founding Vietnam Veterans of America Legal Services (VVALS) to provide assistance to veterans seeking benefits and services from the government. By working under the theory that a veteran representative should be an advocate for the veteran rather than simply a facilitator, VVALS quickly established itself as the most competent and aggressive legal-assistance program available to veterans. VVALS published the most comprehensive manual ever developed for veteran service representatives, and in 1985, VVALS wrote the widely acclaimed Viet Vet Survival Guide. In the nineties, VVALS evolved into the current VVA Service Representative program.

The next several years saw VVA grow in size, stature, and prestige. VVA's professional membership services, veterans service, and advocacy work gained the respect of Congress and the veterans community. In 1986, VVA's exemplary work was formally acknowledged by the granting of a congressional charter.

Today, Vietnam Veterans of America has a national membership of over 85,000, with over 650 chapters throughout the United States, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Guam and the Philippines. VVA state councils coordinate the activities of local chapters. VVA places great emphasis on coordinating its national activities and programs with the work of its local chapters and state councils and is organized to ensure that victories gained at the national level are implemented locally.

VVA strives for individual and group empowerment and locally originated action to assist veterans and other needy members of their communities. These volunteer programs offer unique and innovative services to an ever-widening population. They include: support for homeless shelters; substance-abuse education projects and crime-prevention campaigns; sponsorship of youth sports, Boy Scouts/Girl Scouts, Big Brothers/Big Sisters; and relief to other communities affected by natural disasters and chronic poverty.

VVA is governed by a national board of directors and by national officers — 24 women and men democratically elected by VVA delegates, are sent by their respective chapters to biennial conventions. VVA's essential purpose is to promote the educational, economic, health, cultural, and emotional readjustment of the Vietnam-era veteran to civilian life. This is done by promoting legislation and public-awareness programs to eliminate discrimination suffered by Vietnam veterans.

VVA's government-relations efforts combine the three ingredients essential to success in the legislative arena — lobbying, mobilizing constituents, and working with the media — to achieve its ambitious agenda. Legislative victories have included the establishment and extension of the Vet Center system, passage of laws providing for increased job-training and job-placement assistance for unemployed and underemployed Vietnam-era veterans, the first laws assisting veterans suffering from Agent Orange exposure, and landmark legislation (i.e., Judicial Review of veterans claims) permitting veterans to challenge adverse VA decisions in court. All were enacted largely as a result of VVA's legislative efforts.

VVA helps to provide greater public awareness of the outstanding issues surrounding Vietnam-era veterans by disseminating written information on a continual basis through a weekly electronic publication. [*The VVA Veteran*®](#), VVA's award-winning newspaper, is mailed to all VVA members and friends of the organization. In addition, self-help guides on issues such as [Agent Orange](#) and [Post-traumatic Stress Disorder](#) are published and made available to anyone interested.