



VFW-SVA (Student Veterans of America) fellow Katherine Cassell — life member of VFW Post 12101 in Henderson, Nev., and SVA liaison to VFW's Department of Nevada — pitches her fellowship program project to Ray Kelley — the majority staff director of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee and former VFW National Legislative Services director — on March 2 during the VFW Legislative Conference in Arlington, Va. The VFW-SVA Legislative Fellowship program gives student veterans a chance to be an advocate for veterans' issues.

## 'REBEL' STUDENT VETERAN BRINGS HER EXPERIENCE TO WASHINGTON

*A VFW life member working on her master's degree took part in the VFW-SVA Legislative Fellowship program on Capitol Hill in March. She says her degree will help her serve fellow veterans after her graduation.*

**BY DAVE SPIVA**

Each year, VFW members from across the country gather in the nation's capital for the VFW Legislative Conference. Since 1949, the conference has provided an opportunity for the organization's leaders and activists to speak with policymakers of their respective states.

In recent years, VFW has provided the same for student veterans. The VFW-SVA (Student Veterans of America) Legislative Fellowship program gives student veterans the opportunity to advocate with VFW on issues important to veterans.

"The VFW prides itself on working with our student veterans nationwide

to help build tomorrow's leaders," VFW Commander-in-Chief William "Doc" Schmitz said.

This year's 10 fellows met with the nation's lawmakers and administrators responsible for implementing veterans' policies in Washington, D.C. One of those students was Katherine Cassell, who served in three different military services during her 18-year career. She retired in 2015.

### WORKING ON CAPITOL HILL

Cassell enlisted in the Air Force in 1997 and was discharged in 2000. She also joined the Navy Reserve and served from 2003-06. She then joined the

Army in 2006, where she served until her retirement. She deployed twice to Iraq with the Army's 1st Combat Aviation Brigade from 2007 to 2008 and from 2010 to 2011.

After her retirement, Cassell started attending the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) and joined the University's SVA chapter, Rebel Vets Organization. (See p. 42 of the October 2019 issue of VFW magazine for a story about the chapter's involvement with VFW.) Cassell also is a life member of VFW Post 12101 in Henderson, Nev., and the SVA liaison to the VFW Department of Nevada.

Cassell said she learned about the

VFW-SVA fellowship through other VFW members, who repeatedly urged her to apply. She was persuaded to do so last year and was selected as one of the student veterans to participate.

The students, all VFW members, took part in the 2020 VFW Legislative Conference on Capitol Hill in early March. Each fellow submitted a policy proposal to address a veterans' issue through legislative action.

The students worked on one of four veterans' policy areas:

- Ensuring student veteran success on campus and in the workforce.
- Improving health care and benefits for veterans.
- Easing veterans' transition from military to civilian life.
- Identifying and solving other challenges of service members and their families.

## ADVOCATING FOR VETERANS

Cassell plans to graduate from UNLV in 2022. She is working towards a master's degree in public administration with an emphasis in nonprofits and veteran advocacy. Cassell said her motivation to obtain the degree is to be able to

help veterans and be more involved with advocacy and legislation.

"I look at our country as a whole and what we need, and I realize that our veteran and active-duty population is small," Cassell said. "If we can't even take care of that portion of the country, how are we going to be able to maintain our country as a whole?"

Cassell said that once a military veteran transitions, there are several resources available to them, such as VA health care and veterans service organizations. However, there is no follow-up from the military to ensure that the veteran is successful in their transition plans. She added that the military does not have any statistics that show programs such as TAP (transition assistance program) is helping veterans with their transition from military life.

"I've talked to many veterans across the U.S., and a lot of them say that there should be a government-funded source that veterans can access to get information on benefits such as education, health care, employment and housing," Cassell said. "It would be great if there was a phone number veterans could call to get all that information."

For her fellowship proposal, Cassell introduced a plan that would give veterans a resource to learn more about the benefits available for them and to ensure a successful transition.

"The call centers that the Marine Corps' Wounded Warrior Regiment has was the basis for my proposal," Cassell said.

"A resource like that should be open to all veterans. This would involve expanding the ability of all the call centers put in place for wounded warriors."

While not government funded, VFW's Member Service Center offers helpful advice and can be reached by calling 1-833-VFW-VETS.

Being a part of the VFW Department of Nevada and UNLV, Cassell said that she has taken the opportunity to show younger veterans who are currently serving or who recently left the military the benefit of joining VFW and being involved in veterans' advocacy.

"A lot of them don't know about VFW," Cassell said. "I see SVA students as the future leaders of VFW and our country. If we stay involved with those student veterans, we are showing what our organization can offer students." ★

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## 2020 VFW-SVA LEGISLATIVE FELLOWSHIP CLASS

Since 2013, VFW has aligned with the Student Veterans of America, an organization based in Washington, D.C. SVA is committed to the welfare of military veterans and ensuring they are supported in their transition into higher education. SVA supports more than 1,500 school chapters and more than 700,000 military-affiliated students.

This year's fellows were:

- Tom Baker, Navy veteran, Arizona State University in Tempe, Ariz.
- Katherine Cassell, Army retiree, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.
- Carl Chen, Air Force active-duty service member, Trident University International.
- Clifton Clevenger, Army veteran, Wayland Baptist University in Plainview, Texas.
- Ashley Dent, Air Force veteran, New York Institute of Technology in New York City.
- Sasha Georgiades, Navy veteran, Hawaii Pacific University in Honolulu.
- Blake Hite, Navy veteran, Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.
- Matthew Jenkins, Marine Corps veteran, University of South Florida in Tampa, Fla.
- Randy Purham, Army active-duty service member, American Public University.
- Jack Ratliff, Army veteran, University of South Florida in Tampa, Fla.

Student veterans interested in the fellowship can visit [www.vfw.org/community/student-veterans-of-america/student-fellowship](http://www.vfw.org/community/student-veterans-of-america/student-fellowship) for more information.

