



AMRA Leaders Visit Capitol Hill

March 16-18, 2015

Ted Painter, AMRA Legislative Director

AMRA Executive Director, Peg Bergeron, and new Legislative Director, Ted Painter, comprised this year's annual AMRA delegation trip to Capitol Hill. Although not as large as in previous years, this small team moved efficiently and effectively through House and Senate halls that are as tangled and confusing as much of the legislation their inhabitants produce. Over the course of a three day visit the small delegation met with legislative staff in 29 congressional offices and with the Department of Veterans Affairs' Legislative Director and Secretary McDonald's Liaison to Veterans Service Organizations, Matthew Stiner. Visits targeted Chairpersons and key members of the House and Senate Armed Services Committee, focusing on the Military Personnel Subcommittee as well as the Committee on Veterans' Affairs.



This year's trip began with a meeting at the Veterans Affairs headquarters where the delegation met with Secretary McDonald's VSO Liaison and the Director of Legislative Affairs, R. David Ballenger. This meeting gave AMRA the opportunity to voice its concerns with many of the negative aspects of the VA that have been highlighted during the last year, but to also convey to the VA representatives that AMRA supports and appreciates the efforts of the new Secretary to resolve those issues. The meeting also gave the VA the opportunity to share its legislative goals with AMRA and to encourage AMRA's support for its legislative agenda. AMRA is still in the process of analyzing this agenda and will keep its members informed regarding any decisions that are made.

The primary purpose of this year's visit was to introduce or re-introduce AMRA to key staff members in the offices of select Members of Congress and to encourage them to contact AMRA regarding any legislation that their offices may engage in that is relevant to military retirees. AMRA reinforced its willingness to advise on and support legislation affecting our members and reminded staff members that AMRA is the only Veterans Service Organization (VSO) to focus solely on all varieties of military retirees. These overtures have already paid dividends and AMRA is receiving phone calls and emails from lawmakers' offices asking for our input on legislation that they are introducing or co-sponsoring. AMRA has also, for the first time, been added to guest lists for future congressional "round table" meetings involving other key VSO's.

The AMRA delegation also utilized the occasion of these meetings to gain a sense for lawmakers' views on the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission (MCRMC) report. The feedback that AMRA received was essentially the same in every office visited: Our elected officials are in a "wait and see" mode and are reluctant to take a hard stance on the recommendations until more details are provided. While this is understandable, it did not stop AMRA from making its position on key elements of the report known to all lawmakers and staff members.

Legislative Director, Ted Painter, focused on three major issues within the report and made it clear to everyone that AMRA cannot support reducing the current retirement stipend for future retirees from 50% to 40%. It was



carefully explained that this element of the proposed retirement system is the only element insulated from market and economic fluctuations and that it must be protected to ensure that a future service member is never faced with the possibility of leaving the service with only 40% of his or her base pay in exchange for twenty or more years of service.

Painter went on to explain that AMRA cannot support the way in which the commission has recommended the current Survivor Benefit Plan and Disability Indemnification Compensation (SBP-DIC) offset be solved and that AMRA would be willing to support some aspects of the health care recommendations but not unless a 100% coverage option for working age retirees is made available.

Executive Director, Peg Bergeron, reinforced AMRA's position on these issues but made it clear that there are many aspects of the report that AMRA is willing to support and she commended the Herculean efforts of the Commission to grapple with the myriad of complex and important issues that they were charged with addressing.

In every instance, staff members listened attentively and took detailed notes in order to brief their Congressman or Senator on the issues at a later date. Everyone that the delegation met with expressed their gratitude for AMRA's willingness to share its views and commended AMRA for carefully selecting core issues to address rather than "nit picking" the entire report. In the end, each staff member assured the delegation that AMRA's position would be included in future discussions regarding whether to support or reject the Commission's recommendations and thanked AMRA for getting its views known early—something that most other VSO's, at the time of these meetings, had not yet done.

In the days since these meetings, AMRA's official Position Paper has been published on the "Advocacy" page of its website and shared, for the record, with all of those visited by the delegation.

Prior to the delegation's visit, the AMRA headquarters staff spent a great deal of time putting together folders to be distributed to each person that the delegation met with. These folders provided the delegation the opportunity to leave each office with vital information regarding what AMRA is, what it does, and AMRA's key legislative goals.

Before leaving each meeting, the delegation talked through what was included in each folder and encouraged each staff member to ask his or her Congressman or Senator to co-sponsor legislation that AMRA is currently supporting. These include Concurrent Receipt House Resolutions 303 and 333 and their Senate companion bill, S. 271 and Anti Flag Desecration House Joint Resolution 9. These overtures have already paid dividends as several of the lawmakers whose offices were visited have, indeed, co-sponsored these pieces of legislation.

AMRA's annual delegation visit was a tremendous success. Many staff members had either already met with or corresponded with AMRA's new Legislative Director and these meetings provided an opportunity for these fledgling relationships to be reinforced and nurtured. Additionally, all of the meetings that the delegation attended provided AMRA an opportunity to highlight its position(s) on the recommendations of the MCRMC report and to enter the legislative arena with a confidence, assuredness, and authority that is beginning to be recognized and sought out by lawmakers and their staff members as they make decisions regarding veterans and, specifically, military retirees.



Photo: L-R: Ted Painter, National Legislative Director, Rep. Walter B Jones (NC), National Executive Director Peg Bergeron.