



The United States Capitol, Washington, D.C. Taken on June 14, 2009. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Embassy Canada)

The NCO as a Congressional Fellow

By Sgt. Maj. Travis Votaw

U.S. Army Combined Arms Center

Congressional oversight of our Army comes in many forms, some more obvious than others. Most non-commissioned officers (NCOs) are familiar with congressional inquiries, and many have experienced a congressional delegation visit to their post or forward operating base while deployed. However, few realize Congress plays a pivotal role in nearly all we do.

A 2017 amendment sponsored by Rep. John Carter authorized medical care for a donor to carry out a live transplant procedure to an eligible veteran ("Congressman Carter Testifies," 2017). Rep. Tim Walz sponsored legislation in 2015 to increase the access to mental health care and improve the quality of care for veterans suffering the invisible wounds of war ("Congressional Veterans Caucus-Tim Walz," n.d.).

Sen. James Inhofe, in collaboration with 37 other senators, led the charge to block the privatization of the Defense Commissary Agency system (Jowers, 2016). Sen. Joe Donnelly introduced the Jacob Sexton Military

Suicide Prevention Act in 2014 that mandated mental health screening for all three components to reduce veteran suicide (Lamothe, 2014). And August 7 is National Purple Heart Recognition Day due to legislation sponsored by Sen. Susan Collins ("Senator Collins, Manchin," 2017). Over the last decade, these are five of the several amendments in National Defense Authorization Acts and Military Construction Appropriations that have a singular commonality, an enlisted congressional fellow.

"Noncommissioned officers are valuable members of any staff and bring a wealth of experience and a strong work ethic to the office."

— *Sen. Susan Collins, 2018*

Congress authorizes deployments, funds equipment, confirms our commissioned leaders, and appropriates monies for programs to care for our dependents during a permanent change of station. Congress is also engaged in

various forms of our training, from creating the statute for the Soldier for Life-Transition Assistance Program to combating veteran unemployment and crisis management issues as they arise (Department of Defense, 2015).

One example of how our actions drive congressional oversight was illustrated in 2017 when a social media page frequented by a sister service, emerged with pictures denigrating female service members. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand and Rep. Martha McSally introduced legislation in their respective chambers resulting in a change to the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) which "adds another punitive provision to the military code that allows that activity to be taken to a court martial" (Tritten, 2017, para. 7).

History & Concept

As we begin 2019, it is important for those in our community to reflect on the intent and programmatic changes *The Year of the NCO* brought us a decade ago. Retired Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston wrote in 2009 that one of his objectives was to "inform and educate the American people, Congress, and government institutions of the roles, responsibilities, and the quality service of our NCO corps" (Preston, 2009, p. 3). That same year the Army began to expand educational opportunities for NCOs. One such initiative was the inclusion of senior NCOs in the Army Congressional Fellowship Program (ACFP).

According to the 2017 Army Regulation (AR) 1-202, *The Army Congressional Fellowship Program*, the ACFP has a three-fold purpose:

First, it provides outstanding commissioned officers, noncommissioned officers, and Department of the Army Civilians with firsthand experience and understanding of the strategic relationships between the Army and Congress. Second, the program exposes congressional members and staff to the outstanding quality of the Army's commissioned officers, NCOs, and DACs, allowing them to learn about the Army as an institution through contact with Army personnel working in their office. Third, the program develops individuals for possible future selection as congressional liaison personnel. (p. 1)

NCOs have participated in the ACFP since 2009 and their role has evolved over the years. The first NCOs to participate in the fellowship were Master Sgt. Barbara Rubio and Sgt. Maj. Scott Martin. They were selected to serve as congressional fellows in member offices (one

House/one Senate similar to the construct still used), and two others were selected to serve as legislative liaisons to the House and Senate liaison divisions, respectively.

The first class of NCOs assigned to Capitol Hill were in 2010 and 2011 and were not afforded the educational opportunities at George Washington University, but that changed in 2012. The two sergeants major selected by the panels at Human Resources Command (HRC) and the Office of Congressional Legislative Liaison (OCLL) entered the same fellowships as their officer counterparts and the ACFP has remained status quo since. The ACFP is divided into three distinct phases covering a 44-month span, and once selected by the annual panel at HRC, the senior NCO enters phase one: academics.

"I have been very fortunate to have NCOs work in my office, and I hope we will never have to 'make do' without another one."

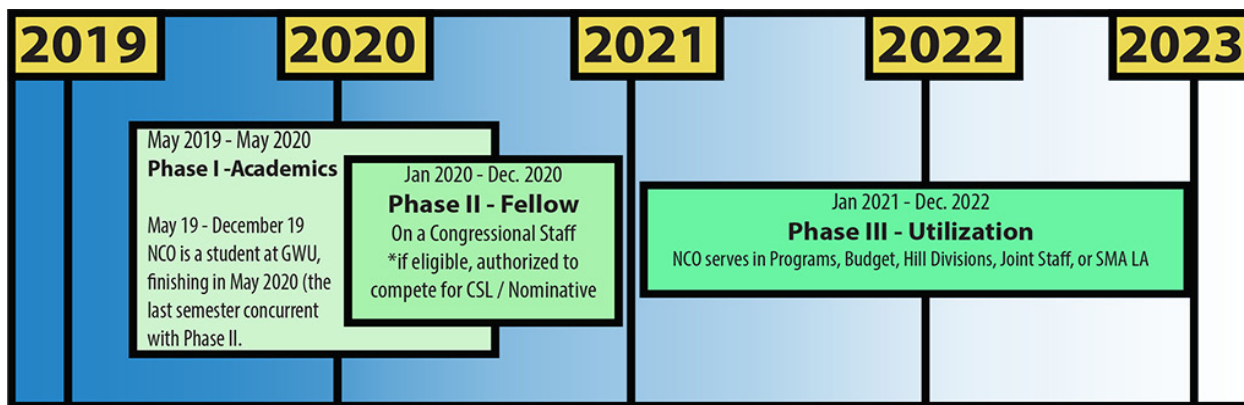
—Rep. Dutch Ruppersberger, 2018

Overview and Timeline

During the first phase of the program, the NCO reports in May and pursues a Master's of Professional Studies in Legislative Affairs at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. for 12 months. The first eight months of the assignment are exclusively focused on being a full-time student, while the remainder is completed concurrently with phase two: the fellowship on Capitol Hill. The Army's 2019 NCO Fellows are currently in phase one (Master Sgt. Larry Hill and Sgt. Maj. Jason Maynard).



NCOs in ACFP. Sergeants major from left to right: Travis Votaw, 2016; Derek Gondek, 2017; Carlos Magwood, 2017; Robert Hawkins, 2015; Jerry Arteaga, 2018; Kevin Miller, 2018; and DeWayne Blackman, 2016. (Photo courtesy of Sgt. Maj. Votaw, taken December 2018)



Graphic by NCO Journal

Phase two has the NCO assigned as a defense fellow to a member of Congress for a full calendar year. Typically, fellows are assigned to members who have a defense oversight role and are able to provide congressional staff with a unique insight as to how their decisions will affect the Army and Department of Defense overall. While duties vary from office to office, it is common for fellows to:

- Prepare the member for hearings, meetings and engagements relative to national security.
- Assist in the oversight of national security matters, DOD authorizations, and appropriations.
- Research, analyze, and draft legislative proposals.
- Assist in developing strategic communications and speech writing.
- Assist the staff with constituent inquiries.
- Provide the member and staff with general military and veteran experience.

In phase three, the NCO serves as a legislative liaison to Congress working as a member of the Army or Joint Staffs. AR 1-202 (2017) governs the fellowship and specifically states that, “Military personnel must agree to serve in a position utilizing experience gained during the congressional fellowship for at least two years immediately following the fellowship” (p. 6).

Utilization duties are determined by the Chief, Legislative Liaison (CLL) in one of a number of positions in OCLL, Budget Liaison, Army Staff, Joint Staff, Office of the Secretary of Defense or other headquarters to best support the mission of the CLL. The graphic (above) is an example of what the timeline looks like for an NCO selected in 2018.

Eligibility to become a fellow in the ACFP may vary from year to year, but recently the general requirements were:

- Sergeant major/command sergeant major or master sergeant/first sergeant (in any of the three components) with a date of rank prior to May 2, 2018.

- All Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development System/Structured Self Development required for the current grade completed.
- Possess a bachelor’s degree from an accredited institution with a 3.0 GPA or higher (unless they already possess a graduate degree).
- Meet Army height/weight standards and be in excellent physical condition.
- Have interpersonal skills and the ability to interact and form relationships with individuals from diverse backgrounds. The candidate must have superb writing and speaking skills.
- Able to serve/complete a two-year utilization assignment immediately following the fellowship without interruption. (Strout, 2018)

Progress

Since 2009, NCOs within the ACFP have served as congressional fellows for 14 members of Congress representing 13 different states; seven from an Armed Forces Committee seat, eight Appropriators, and fairly distributed across the two parties. Of note, among the 10 senators and four congressmen that NCOs have served, at least three were committee chairmen with multiple members specifically asking for an NCO the next time they were afforded an Army Fellow. The population of NCO fellows since 2009 has included two master sergeants and 17 sergeants major from a wide range of military occupation specialties with the majority coming from the infantry.

As with any program worth merit, the NCO role in the ACFP continues to develop and improve based on feedback from previous cohorts. Collectively, these efforts have resulted in NCOs having the authority to serve in both the House and Senate Liaison Divisions, Budget Liaison, and the OCLL Programs Division. Due to proven performance, NCOs are now assigned as congressional delegation pay agents (2016), and are able to compete for Centralized Selection List billets commensurate with their officer counterparts (2017). In addi-

tion, NCOs now earn an Additional Skills Identifier for serving as a Congressional Fellow (6Z), and due to the overall success and drive of NCOs in the program, the

billet allotment is increasing from two to three NCOs for the 2020 cohort (2018).■

References

- Army Regulation 1-202. (2017). *The Army Congressional Fellowship Program*. Retrieved from https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN2791_AR1-202_Web_FINAL.pdf
- Collins, E. (2009). NCOs head to Capitol Hill. *Army Times*. Retrieved from https://www.army.mil/article/16973/ncos_head_to_capitol_hill
- Collins, Elizabeth, 2010JUN, "Storming the Hill" *Army Times*.
- Congressional veterans caucus - Tim Walz, (n.d.). *Military Times*. Retrieved from <http://caucus.militarytimes.com/speaker/tim-walz/>
- Congressman Carter testifies on the importance of Veterans Transplant Coverage Act of 2017. (2017, October 24). Retrieved from <https://carter.house.gov/press-releases/congressman-carter-testifies-on-the-importance-of-veterans-transplant-coverage-act-of-2017/>
- DeMaio, D. (2009). Year of the NCO. *Army Times*. Retrieved from https://www.army.mil/article/16896/year_of_the_nco_corporal_to_serjeant_major_of_the_army
- Department of Defense. (2015, November 30). Transition Assistance Program for military personnel. *Federal Register*. Retrieved from <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2015/11/30/2015-30240/transition-assistance-program-tap-for-military-personnel>
- Jowers, K. (2016, May 17). Senators renew attempt to privatize commissaries--and one vows to stop it. *Military Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2016/05/17/senators-renew-attempt-to-privatize-commissaries-and-one-vows-to-stop-it/>
- Lamothe, D. (2014, December 22). Two military suicide bills, different results: The Jacob Sexton and Clay Hunt acts. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2014/12/22/two-military-suicide-bills-different-results-the-jacob-sexton-and-clay-hunt-acts/>
- Senator Collins, Manchin announce passage of their resolution supporting purple heart day. (2017, August 2). Retrieved from <https://www.collins.senate.gov/newsroom/senators-collins-manchin-announce-passage-their-resolution-supporting-purple-heart-day>
- Strout, J. (2018). Broadening opportunities catalog. *Human Resources Command*. Retrieved from <http://www.benning.army.mil/Armor/OCOA/content/References%20and%20Guides/BOP%20Catalog%202019.pdf>
- Tritten, T.J. (2017). Marines United nude photo scandal triggers House vote to change military law. *Washington Examiner*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/marines-united-nude-photo-scandal-triggers-house-vote-to-change-military-law>

Sgt. Maj. Travis D. Votaw is currently the G3/5/7 operations sergeant major for the Combined Arms Center. He has served in every NCO leadership position from team leader to command sergeant major, including the legislative assistant to the sergeant major of the Army. He has a B.S. in Criminal Justice, an M.A. in Leadership and Management, and an M.P.A. in Legislative Affairs from George Washington University. He completed the Army's Congressional Fellowship program in 2018 and served as a Fellow for Senator Inhofe in 2016.



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>
<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>
<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

