



Blinded Veterans Association Historical Achievements

The Blinded Veterans Association (BVA) is the only national Veterans Service Organization (VSO) chartered by the United States Congress and exclusively dedicated to assisting America's blinded veterans and their families. Approximately 100 war-blinded soldiers from World War II founded BVA on March 28, 1945. The BVA Congressional charter designates the organization as the official advocate and representative for all blinded veterans before the executive and legislative branches of government. Throughout the 76 years of its existence, BVA has successfully carried out this important function while at the same time contributing meaningfully to making life better for thousands of individual blinded veterans from across the country.

Since the organization's early beginning, BVA has worked tirelessly with the now Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to assure top-quality, comprehensive medical and rehabilitative services/benefits for blinded veterans. When the U.S. Army discontinued its blind rehabilitation services for the war blind at the end of World War II, BVA played an instrumental role in persuading VA to assume the responsibility for their care and rehabilitation.

As early as 1947, BVA adopted resolutions in convention assembled, calling for the establishment of a comprehensive residential Blind Rehabilitation Center (BRC). The facility would assist blinded veterans in their adjustment to vision loss and the acquisition of adaptive skills. Due in large measure to BVA's efforts, the first BRC opened its doors on July 4, 1948. As the numbers of war-blinded veterans increased with the onset of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, BVA recommended that VA expand the number of BRCs nationally. Today, there are 13 comprehensive residential BRCs across the VA Healthcare system. As BRC programs grew and evolved, BVA persuaded Congress and VA to expand eligibility for blind rehabilitation services to veterans whose blindness was not the result of their military service. Hundreds of blinded veterans have received rehabilitation assistance as a result of this achievement.

BVA also played an instrumental role in the establishment of the Visual Impairment Service Team (VIST) Program. Recognizing the isolating effects of blindness and the fact that blinded veterans were not accessing all the benefits and services for which they were eligible, the Association participated in a pilot outreach program in 1967. The purpose of the program was to identify eligible veterans and encourage them to take full advantage of VA benefits and services. The key professional staff person on the VIST was the VIST Coordinator. In the early years, this position was only part-time. BVA quickly recognized that a part-time VIST Coordinator was not adequate to coordinate all of the services required by blinded veterans and urged VA to make these positions full-time. VA responded by establishing six full-time VIST Coordinator positions in 1978. BVA persisted in advocating for additional full-time positions and convinced Congress to provide the funding for such.

Dating back to 1947, BVA has continuously petitioned VA to provide outpatient blind rehabilitation services. The organization was successful in convincing Congress to earmark \$5 million in the 1995 Fiscal Year VA Appropriation for Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS). These dollars enabled BRS to establish 15 Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialists (BROS) positions. Today that number has grown to over 100 full-time positions. In addition, BVA has influenced legislation that provided the means by which a student preparing to become a BROS would be included in a VA scholarship assistance program if qualified.

For many years, VA was the employer of choice for Blind Rehabilitation Specialists (Orientation and Mobility Professionals and Rehabilitation Teachers). When this dynamic changed, BVA stepped in to play a critical role in convincing VA to

reclassify in Human Resources Title 38 the Blind Rehabilitation Specialist position. The result was a higher salary, improved recruitment, and greater retention for the position, thus restoring VA as the employer of choice and insuring delivery of top-quality comprehensive services.

Additionally, VA BRS provided the necessary resources from the \$5 million to establish Computer Access Training Sections (CATS) at the five largest BRCs. Computer access training is now provided at all 13 BRCs. Eligible veterans also receive appropriate computer equipment to accomplish their stated goals.

BVA, along with other major VSOs, also convinced Congress to amend federal law expanding eligibility for VA health care. A significant highlight of this legislation was language that provided VA with the authority, for the first time, to provide guide dog benefits and adaptive vision technology to veterans whose blindness is not service connected.

As an active member and supporter of the Visual Impairment Advisory Board (VIAB), established by the Under Secretary for Health, then Executive Director Tom Miller recommended that VA implement a full continuum of vision rehabilitation services and care. The adoption of this recommendation was a major achievement. In January 2007, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs approved such a continuum and committed \$40 million over three years. VA subsequently established nine new Vision Impairment Services in Outpatient Rehabilitation (VISOR) clinics for low-vision veterans across the Veterans Health Care System.

On the benefits side of VA, BVA has been instrumental in improving the Disability Rating Schedule as it relates to visual impairment and blindness. At one point, for example, VA did not accurately rate the severity of blindness when combined with hearing loss. BVA's efforts have brought about improvements in this rating. Blind and visually impaired veterans are now rated more severely disabled if they have also experienced hearing loss.

In 2007, BVA was successful in advocating for change in the Paired Organ Section of Title 38 to more equitably compensate veterans who were service-connected for vision loss in one eye and subsequently lost vision in their nonservice-connected eye. Prior to this achievement, a war-blinded veteran who was service-connected for loss of vision in one eye would need to have vision loss that reached 5/200 to obtain a rating for loss if his nonservice-connected eye became blind. The change allows for 20/200 to be the standard for increasing the rating in the Paired Organ Section.

BVA also played a leading role in securing Dependency & Indemnity Compensation (DIC) benefits for surviving spouses and dependent children of 100 percent service-connected disabled veterans. Prior to 1978, DIC benefits were paid only when a veteran died of his/her service-connected condition. The change advocated for by BVA made it possible for surviving spouses and dependent children to be eligible for DIC benefits, regardless of the cause of the veteran's death. Still believing that DIC benefits were not equitable because they were based on a veteran's rank while in the service and not on the disability, BVA led the efforts for further reform. The Association succeeded once again as the quality of the DIC benefit was improved for surviving spouses and/or dependent children of disabled veterans.

BVA influenced the establishment of the Specially Adaptive Housing Grant, administered by the Veterans Benefits Administration, and the initiation of the Home Improvement and Structural Alteration grant administered by the Veterans Health Administration. Both of the grants have assisted severely visually impaired and blinded veterans in the attainment of affordable housing.

In July 2012, BVA's advocacy made it possible for legally blinded service-connected veterans to be included in the Special Housing Adaptation (SHA) grant for home modifications. In 2020, blinded veterans were included in the larger Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) grant.

Over the past 75 years, BVA has worked collaboratively with organizations of and for the blind to improve the quality of life for all blind Americans. BVA is represented on a wide variety of federal and state advisory committees within such agencies as the VA Central Office in Washington, DC, the Department of Labor, the Office of Personnel Management, the Small Business Administration, the VA Rehabilitation Research and Development Center, and the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision at Mississippi State University.

BVA takes advantage of every opportunity to present the special needs of America's blinded veterans before policymakers at all levels of government. Therefore, the greater the number of members of the association, the louder the voice. Please seriously consider joining the rich history behind the motto "Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans and their Families."

For a more extensive overview of BVA's historic legislative accomplishments, including recent testimonies and upcoming priorities, visit the organization's Government Relations page associated with <https://bva.org/>.