



## Blinded Veterans Association Historical Achievements (Bulleted)

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. The organization is celebrating 76 years of service.

A meeting of 100 war-blinded soldiers from World War II resulted in the founding of BVA on March 28, 1945. The BVA Congressional charter of August 1958 designates the organization as the official advocate and representative for all blinded veterans before the executive and legislative branches of government. Throughout its long history, BVA has successfully carried out this important mission. In the process, the organization has recorded numerous significant accomplishments on behalf of America's blinded veterans and their families. The Association's most notable achievements to date have been:

- Assuring that the Veterans Administration of the 1940s, now known as the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), assume the primary responsibility for the care and rehabilitation of America's blinded veterans and service members requiring blind or low-vision services.
- Collaborating and, when necessary, serving as an adversary with VA to assure top-quality, comprehensive medical and rehabilitation services and benefits for blinded veterans. The mutually beneficial relationship between the agency and the association has continued for 75 years with members often appointed to various VA committees and advisory councils.
- Advocating for the first VA Blind Rehabilitation Center (BRC), inaugurated in Hines, Illinois, on July 4, 1948. As the numbers of war-blinded have increased with new conflicts, the number of BRCs has also increased. They now number 13. Computer Access Training Sections (CATS) are available at each BRC and at nine Vision Impairment Services Outpatient Rehabilitation (VISOR) programs.
- Persuading the U.S. Congress to expand the eligibility for blind rehabilitation services to veterans whose blindness was not a result of their military service. Literally thousands of blinded veterans have thereby received rehabilitation assistance.
- Advocating for the successful creation and growth of the VA Visual Impairment Team (VIST) Coordinator and Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialist (BROS) positions and the VA 2007 "Full Continuum of Rehabilitation Care" initiative that brought additional outpatient and inpatient service programs to veterans with either low vision or blindness.
- Expanding full-time BROS positions from 24 in 2005 to over 100 today, with one at every VA Polytrauma Center.
- Advocating for an increase in VA Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS) funding from \$94 million in Fiscal Year 2007 to \$162 million in 2015, resulting in 235 additional rehabilitation employees in BRCs and outpatient programs.

- Working with other VSOs to assure the passage of Section 1624 of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2008. The legislation mandated the creation and implementation of a joint Department of Defense/VA Vision Center of Excellence (VCE) and created the Defense Eye Injury Vision Registry, improving the “Seamless Transition” of the combat eye wounded.
- Helping to introduce and enact legislation in May 2010 that eliminated all medical care co-payments for catastrophically disabled blinded veterans who are nonservice-connected. The law has resulted in improved access to rehabilitation services for many additional low income blinded veterans who now have no co-payments for health care or medications.
- Advocating for equitable “Paired Organ” compensation to veterans who are service-connected for damage in one eye and subsequently lose their vision in the other eye.
- Collaborating with professional medical organizations seeking additional congressional funding for the defense-related translational battlefield Vision Research Program to increase funding from \$4 million annually in FY 2008 to \$10 million annually during FY 2012-16. The funding increased to \$15 million in FY 2017 and FY 2018 and to \$20 million in FY2019-2021, resulting in more than 198 research papers published and improvements in five translational battlefield eye injury care clinical trials. Organizations with which BVA has collaborated include the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology (ARVO), the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO), the American Optometric Association (AOA), and the National Alliance for Eye and Vision Research (NAEVR).
- Assuring that new landmark provisions to make monthly payments to full-time caregivers of war disabled blinded veterans were included in the Caregiver and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 (Public Law 111-163) and continued advocacy to include other generations of disabled veterans in this program. In May 2018, the Mission Act included expansion of caregiver benefits for previous generations of war-wounded veterans.
- Influencing the reclassification of the Blind Rehabilitation Specialist positions (Orientation and Mobility Professionals and Rehabilitation Teachers) that included scholarships for students preparing for a VA career in rehabilitation, higher salaries, improved recruitment, and greater retention.
- Helping to change the VA rating system for blindness so that blind and visually impaired veterans could be considered more severely disabled if they have already experienced a hearing loss.
- Assuming a leading role in securing Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) benefits for surviving spouses and dependent children of 100 percent service-connected disabled veterans.
- Influencing the establishment of the Special Housing Adaptation (SHA) Grant and the initiation of the Home Improvement and Structural Alteration (HISA) grant that assists blinded veterans in making structural modifications to their living arrangements to accommodate independent living with a disability.
- Advocating for beneficiary travel during three sessions of Congress that finally paid off. On September 29, 2016 the FY 2017 Continuing Resolution federal agency funding included a section that gave VA the statutory authority under Title 38, U.S.C. Section 111, to provide VA travel benefits to all catastrophically disabled, nonservice-connected blind and visually impaired veterans seeking rehabilitation services at VA facilities. The legislation applies similarly to amputees and individuals with spinal cord injuries for travel to specialized rehabilitation centers.

- Working with the Veterans Travel Program to include blinded veterans for local Special Mode VA-authorized transportation for outpatient medical care. A final review took place in 2018.
- Visiting with returning war blinded Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom service members and their families at the former Walter Reed Army Medical Center and the Bethesda Naval National Medical Center beginning in 2005. Visits were later transferred to the newly combined Walter Reed National Military Medical Center-Bethesda. The visits focused on Seamless Transition issues among service members and the National Guard and Reserves, allowing BVA to assist them and their caregivers in accessing rehabilitation services and VA benefits.
- Establishing the Operation Peer Support (OPS) program in 2006. The initiative seeks to connect the newly war blinded and their families with those who have gone through similar adjustments in the past, demonstrating that life after blindness is a reality. The program includes attendance at an annual BVA national convention in which the focus is rehabilitation, education, employment, technology, sports/recreation, and more recently expanded events throughout the year that have generated numerous BVA news stories, raised public awareness of BVA OPS programs, and national and international recognition from government agencies, associations, and vision researchers.
- Establishing Project Gemini in May 2011. Project Gemini is a joint initiative among BVA, Blind Veterans UK, and St Dunstan's of South Africa. The initiative seeks to heighten public awareness within the three countries of the issues facing recently war-blinded veterans with vision loss, resulting in improvements in services and benefits by raising awareness about vision rehabilitation services, vision trauma research, and the management of eye injuries. The initiative received the "International Soldering On Award" in March 2017 in London.
- Advocating for entitlement to Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) grants for legally blind veterans, while increasing grant awards to \$98,640, and authorizing ten year grant eligibility renewal.
- Advocating for the VA Contracting Preference Consistency Act, which addressed the unemployment rate of blinded veterans by ensuring that companies and nonprofit organizations employing blinded veterans and other disabled veterans receive contracting preference from VA. The legislation preserves the AbilityOne Contracting Program with respect to products and services VA was purchasing before the Veterans First Program was created in 2006. At the time the bill was introduced, expiring VA contracts with AbilityOne companies threatened the jobs of some 2,800 blind or severely disabled persons in 30 states.
- Advocating for the Department of Veterans Affairs Website Accessibility Act of 2019, ensuring that VA websites are compliant with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

While this is not a complete list of all the various accomplishments of BVA, it highlights the impact the Association has had and is currently having today on the lives of thousands of blinded or low vision veterans and their families. Access to VA health care, vision research, rehabilitation, and benefits are improving.