

BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION
73rd NATIONAL CONVENTION

ANNUAL REPORT
OF THE NATIONAL OFFICERS AND
NATIONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS

FISCAL YEAR 2018
(JULY 1, 2017 - JUNE 30, 2018)

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**BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION
73rd NATIONAL CONVENTION
SPARKS, NEVADA
AUGUST 13-17, 2018**

**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE NATIONAL OFFICERS
AND NATIONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

INTRODUCTION

The Blinded Veterans Association National Board of Directors and the National Headquarters presents this report for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2018. The National Board is pleased to report that BVA's financial position remains reasonably stable as we continue to look for ways to strengthen BVA's financial position. Headquarters continues to operate out of the Fleet Reserve Association (FRA) building in Alexandria, VA. We are leasing the entire 3rd floor of the building until we can locate a permanent building site. Below are highlights of the past year:

- 1) Active membership of the Association as of June 30, 2018 was 7,293. At this time last year, the active membership had a total of 8,064. Renewals as of June 30, 2018 totaled 65. Membership statistics will be appended to the hard copy version of this report as Appendix A.
- 2) Spring 2018 elections were held in Director Districts 1 and 2. Dennis O'Connell was re-elected in District 1 and Timothy Hornik was elected for District 2.
- 3) We currently have a total of fifteen (15) employees. Fourteen (14) are full-time employees and one (1) part-time permanent employees. We also have three (3) contractors.
- 4) Joe Bogart, Executive Director recently visited the island of Puerto Rico

to present a check on behalf of BVA to assist blind veterans and their families impacted by Hurricane Maria. The money was donated from the remaining funds left from the Hurricane Harvey campaign.

5) Smith-Bucklin Corporation is BVA's new outsourced financial management team. Their term of service is from March 1, 2018, until February 28, 2019.

BVA'S OPS PROGRAM EVENTS

1) BVA Operation Peer Support program hosted their first annual Quail Valley Golf Tournament on Monday, April 9, 2018. The golf tournament is a great way to support our visually impaired and blind veterans. Those who registered to play met our veteran's while enjoying an afternoon of golf activities, great food and camaraderie.

2) The BAT program is a collaboration with other organizations to get veterans of various abilities out to experience the Appalachian Trail. The first mission began in June of 2018. Blinded veterans from the U.S. and UK walked sections of the Appalachian Trail from the north to south of Georgia, along with their ranger instructor/guide. The adventure began near the Blue Ridge Gap (vicinity of the N. Carolina border) and finished at the U.S. Army Ranger Camp in Dahlonega, Georgia. The journey was nearly 75 miles of rugged and rocky terrain reaching elevation heights of 4,400 feet.

3) On March 25, 2018, four members of the BVA participated in the Bataan Memorial Death March, along with two sighted guides, in a challenging 26.2-mile full marathon march through high desert terrain in honor of the heroic service members who defended the Philippine Islands during World War II as they sacrificed their freedom, health, and, in many cases, their lives. This is primarily a military event, but many civilians also participate in the challenging march.

4) The Major Charles R. Soltes Jr. OD, Memorial Golf Tournament was held in Irvine, California from October 8 – 14, 2017. This is the 13th annual golf event where six blinded American veterans and six British Army war-blinded comrades shared rehabilitation experiences and stories of personal adjustment to blindness. The exchange group also participated in their first international White Cane Day event on Friday, October 13. The event marks the annual competition to honor Major Soltes who became the first U.S.

Army Optometrist to be killed in action while serving on active duty in Iraq. The tournament raises money to support eye care services for veterans who suffered eye injuries during combat.

5) Five blinded veterans will attempt kayaking the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon during the week of September 2-11, 2018. They have been training with experts from the non-profit Team River Runner program that promotes kayaking and recreational water adventures for wounded and disabled veterans.

DIRECTORS AND NATIONAL OFFICERS

The members of the National Board of Directors are:

National President and Chairman, Joe Parker, Pisgah Forest, NC

National Vice-President, Paul Mimms, Kansas City, MO

National Secretary, Joe McNeil, Columbus, GA

National Treasurer, Daniel Wallace, Cape Coral, FL

Director District 1, Dennis O'Connell, Long Beach, NY

Director District 2, David Fox, Kettering, OH

Director District 3, Vernon Richmond, Haw River, NC

Director District 4, Jhennicea Morrow, Gilbert, AZ

Director District 5, Paul Kaminsky, Middleburg, FL

Director District 6, Dr. Thomas Zampieri, Houston, TX

Immediate Past National President, Robert Stamper, Hayden, ID

**Honorary Members to Board of Directors, Joe W. Burns, New Orleans, LA
and Dr. Donald Gagliano, National Harbor, MD**

National Chaplain, Jay McLeod, Hampton, VA

National Sergeant-at-Arms, Monaca Gilmore, Rocky Mount, NC

COMMITTEES AND REPRESENTATIVES

The following appointments were made following BVA's 72nd National Convention by National President Parker and unanimously approved by the Board:

Executive Committee

Joe Parker, Chairman; Jhennicea Morrow, Daniel Wallace, Dr. Thomas

Zampieri and Robert Stamper, Past BVA President

Audit Committee:

Joe W. Burns, Chairman; Robert Stamper and Daniel Wallace

Honorary Members of Board of Directors:

Joe Burns and Dr. Donald Gagliano

Life Membership Fund Board of Trustees:

Joe W. Burns, Chairman; Thomas H. Miller, Paul Mimms, Daniel Wallace and Joe Bogart, HQ Staff

Legislative Committee:

Dr. Thomas Zampieri, Chairman; Joe McNeil, Joe Parker, Robert Stamper and Daniel Wallace

Investment Fund Board of Trustees:

Joe W. Burns, Chairman; Aaron Pomerantz, Thomas H. Miller, Daniel Wallace and Joseph Bogart, HQ Staff

Scholarship Committee:

Rosalind McQueen, Eric Bridges and Dr. Mike Gandy

BVA/BRS Committee:

Paul Mimms, Chairman; Dennis O'Connell, Joe McNeil and Claudia Belk, HQ Staff

Membership/Dues Committee:

Paul Kaminsky, Chairman; Vernon Richmond, Paul Mimms, Danny Wallace,

Dr. Thomas Zampieri, and HQ Staff Claudia Belk and Cecilia Amaya-Montenegro

Fundraising/Publicity Committee:

Dr. Thomas Zampieri, Chairman; Vernon Richmond, Joe McNeil and Robert Stamper

Ombudsman:

Joe W. Burns

Field Service Program Committee:

David Fox, Chairman; Paul Mimms, Daniel Wallace, Jhennicea Morrow, and HQ Staff Wade Davis and Claudia Belk

Education and Training Committee:

Paul Kaminsky, Chairman; David Fox, Dennis O'Connell and Joe Bogart, HQ Staff

Historian Committee:

Dr. George Stocking, Chairman; Samuel L. Huhn and Thomas Miller

Eye Trauma Research Steering Committee:

Dr. Thomas Zampieri, Chairman; Dr. Donald Gagliano, Co-Chairman; Dr. Greg Goodrich, Joe Burns, Robert Stamper, and HQ Staff Joe Bogart

Building Committee:

Robert Stamper, Chairman, Joe Burns, Paul Mimms, Danny Wallace and Joe Bogart, HQ Staff

OPS Committee:

Daniel Wallace, Chairman; Steve Baskis, Lonnie Bedwell, Monaca Gilmore, Tina Lemus, Scott Scieszinski, and Brian Harris, voting members; Tom Clark,

Dr. Thomas Zampieri and Lindsay Ruais non-voting members, and Paul Mimms, Observer

Regional Group Task Force Committee:

Paul Mimms, Chairman; Dave Fox, Paul Kaminsky, Jhennicea Morrow, Dennis O'Connell, Vernon Richmond, Joe McNeil and Dr. Thomas Zampieri

Communications Media Committee:

Paul Mimms, Chairman; Paul Kaminsky David Fox, Dr. Thomas Zampieri, Jhennicea Morrow, Vernon Richmond, Eric Marts, and HQ Staff Melanie Brunson and Chet Curtis

WARS Fund:

Dr. Donald Gagliano, Chairman of the Warriors Alliance to Restore Sight (WARS)/BVA Research Fund

Assistant National Secretaries and Assistant National Treasurers:

- **Joseph Bogart, Executive Director/Assistant National Treasurer**
- **Melanie Brunson, Director of Public Affairs/Asst. National Treasurer**
- **Brigitte Jones, Administrative Director/Asst. National Secretary**

MEETINGS AND ACTIONS OF NATIONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Board of Director's Meeting March 21-23, 2018

- **Board is looking for a way to separate the delegates from the general members attending the sessions while at conventions. One suggestion was to have a table up front for the delegates or put in a separate section.**
- **Board voted to consider Tulsa, OK and Rochester, NY for 2019 convention.**

- **Board voted to separate the 2020 convention from the 2020 Veterans Day Reception at Arlington. The Board also voted to have the 2020 convention locations relate to BVA's historical origin. Possibly in Connecticut or Chicago. We will need membership approval to move our date to host from the 2025 year to 2020 year.**
- **Board voted to discontinue the blind hockey program for the time being. They will look at other ways of managing the program.**
- **BVA's 73rd Convention will be held at the Nugget Casino Resort in Sparks, Nevada during the period August 13-17, 2018.**
- **BVA's Scholarship program is entering its 35th year for the Kathern F. Gruber Scholarship and the 6th year for the Thomas H. Miller Scholarship.**
- **Currently we have 53 regional groups. Measures are ongoing to improve support and services to our regional groups to ensure they are working effectively, efficiently, and being productive. Most importantly, we want our regional groups to remain in a "good standing status". Several groups are still struggling to exist.**
- **The audit was complete in November 2017. The audit had a clean opinion. No discrepancies or irregularities were found. We will be changing our auditing firm after 15 years. Will begin looking at other firms in the coming weeks.**
- **The building at 477 H Street, NW DC sold for \$5.4 million. BVA's net after commissions and fees was \$5.0 million. Four million went into a building fund, and \$1 million was placed into the main/investment account. The current value of the building fund is \$4.17 million.**
- **The Life Membership apportionment for disbursement in FY 2017 was a little over \$40,000, half of what it had been in the past. The return rate went from 8% down to 4.5%. This is in part due to how the stocks were**

being distributed. What should have been a return of capital was labeled as dividends.

- Board approved changing Washington State Regional Group's name to Washington State-Joe Jackson Regional Group. A new charter and bylaws will be printed and mailed.
- The Marrakesh Treaty is making progress in the Senate. This treaty will increase the number of books available to BVA members in accessible formats.
- The annual testimony went well on March 14. It was presented by Vice-President Paul Mimms.

Post-Convention Minutes August 18, 2017

The following appointments and resolutions were adopted without objection from the Board:

- Appointed the Executive Director as Assistant National Treasurer and the Administrative Director as Assistant National Secretary and appointed the Director of Public Affairs as Assistant National Treasurer to have sufficient signatories.
- Adopted a resolution that at least one of the two signatories required by the BVA National Bylaws for the withdrawal of BVA financial deposits should be either the Executive Director or the Administrative Director.
- Adopted a resolution that the Assistant National Treasurer and the Assistant National Secretary are empowered to roll over investments in T-Bills, certificates of deposit, and money market accounts at their discretion, and to invest surplus funds in high-yield financial instruments without the prior approval of the National Board of Directors.

- **Adopted a resolution that the Board appoint the Executive Director/Assistant National Treasurer and Director of Public Affairs/ Assistant National Treasurer, and Administrative Director/Assistant National Secretary, as officers of the Association for the purposes of executing registration forms required by the various states in compliance with those states' laws for the registration of BVA as a charitable organization engaged in direct-mail fundraising.**
- **Adopted a corporate resolution as required by the brokerage firm authorizing the Executive Director and the Administrative Director to make appropriate transactions of the BVA Life Membership Fund (LMF) negotiables as required.**
- **Adopted a corporate resolution as required by the brokerage firm authorizing the Executive Director and the Administrative Director to make appropriate transactions of the BVA Investment Fund negotiables as required.**
- **Adopted a resolution that appoints the Executive Director as the Benefits plan administrator of the Blinded Veterans Association for all employee benefits.**
- **Agreed to maintain the blanket bond coverage with a limit of \$2,000,000 for Board of Directors, BVA employees and any non-compensated officer.**
- **Board made a unanimous decision to appoint Mr. Jay McLeod as National Chaplain for a 1-year term.**

72nd Convention Minutes August 14-18, 2017

- **Board approved all minutes from 71st BVA National Convention previously distributed by e-mail.**
- **Board approved Annual Report for FY 2017 previously distributed by e-mail.**

- **Board approved the proposed BVA budget for FY 2018 and financials as of June 30, 2017.**
- **Financials overall had a better year, in part due to the fundraiser's continuous efforts to cut expenses and focus more on increasing revenue. Net revenue from Direct Mail only increased by \$100,000 with a net margin improving from 19.9% last year to 27.7% this year. Bequests increased by \$422,000 this year over last year due to our Planned Giving efforts. Our net worth is \$12.4 million after reducing it by our overall deficit of \$239,000. We covered operating expenses with the reserves available cash and Investment Account remaining from a large bequest received in 2014. The budget we are presenting met the Board's resolution to cut expenses by at least \$100,000 which brings the budget deficit to below \$1 million. This is an improvement from the \$1.2 million last year.**
- **Keynote Speaker during first Business Session – Mr. David Shulkin, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Washington, DC. Secretary Shulkin thanked the veterans and their family members for their service and sacrifices on behalf of this nation, and as well for their continued devotion and advocacy on behalf of veterans. He then provided an update on the work they are doing at the VA to better serve the veterans and their families. In May, he stood up for accountability and whistleblower protection, and in June, President Trump signed the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017.**
- **Welcome remarks were made by John Rutherford, U.S. Representative for Florida's 4th Congressional District; Bill Spann, Director of Military Affairs and Veterans Department in Jacksonville on behalf of Mayor of Jacksonville Lenny Curry; Michelle Barth on behalf of Senator Bill Nelson; and Mrs. Sandy Krasnodemski, President of BVA Auxiliary. A letter of welcome was read from President Donald Trump.**

- **Guest speaker for the President’s Reception was Scott Blackburn, Acting-Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs.**
- **There were around 163 VA employees in attendance.**
- **Guest speaker for the Father Carroll Memorial Luncheon was Michael Hudson, Director of American Printing House for the Blind Museum in Louisville. He provided a very motivating speech through the words of Father Thomas Carroll.**
- **The convention voted unanimously to pass a combined total of 21 resolutions. Fifteen were previous resolutions passed as a block.**
- **Five (5) proposed bylaw amendments was presented for consideration.**
 - **Proposed Bylaw Amendment Numbers 1, 2 and 4 Failed to Pass.**
 - **Proposed Bylaw Amendments Numbers 3 and 5 were pulled by Submitter.**
- **There was a total of 246 in attendance at the Jacksonville convention. This included 145 members, 73 guests, 11 staff and 17 OPS members. We had 55 Exhibitors. Total Revenue was \$133,150. Total Registration was \$24,550. Sponsorship totaled \$68,575. Exhibitor booth revenue was \$34,600. We received \$480 in donations earmarked for the hospitality room.**
- **Nominations for elections of National Officers were held with the following results:**
 - **National President: Joe Parker - 57.6% and Paul Mimms – 42.4%. Mr. Parker was elected as National President of the BVA.**
 - **National Vice-President: Paul Mimms – 50.2%. and Dr. Thomas Zampieri 49.8%. Mr. Mimms was elected as National Vice-President of the BVA.**

- **National Secretary: Joe McNeil – 52%; Dave Fox – 44.6% and Elizabeth Holmes – 3.4%. Mr. McNeil was elected as National Secretary of the BVA.**
- **National Treasurer: Danny Wallace – 65.6%; Wanda Grover – 27.5% and Darryl Goldsmith – 6.9%. Mr. Wallace was elected as National Treasurer of the BVA.**
- **The Major General Melvin J. Maas Achievement Award for 2017 was presented to Kennan Horn of Edmond, Oklahoma. This award is presented to the individual for his/her outstanding achievements.**
- **The David L. Schnair Volunteer Service Award for 2017 was presented to Dennis O’Connell of Long Beach, New York. This award recognizes and individual for his/her extraordinary volunteer work on behalf of blinded veterans.**
- **The Irving Diener Award for 2017 was presented to Leonard Pope of Ewing, New Jersey. This award is presented to the individual for his/her outstanding contribution to the growth and development of their regional group.**
- **Certificates of Appreciation were presented to Kelly Golden from Spokane, Washington and Evelyn Cabrera-Heatwole from Richmond, Virginia. The award recognizes individuals, groups, employers, etc., who have provided outstanding services to blinded veterans and/or to BVA at the national level.**
- **The 2017 Award of Excellence for Blind Rehabilitation Services was presented to VA New Jersey Health Care System, Lyons, New Jersey.**
- **Mark Cornell received a service award for his commitment and dedicated services to our blinded veterans and their families.**

- **The Gold Gavel was presented to the Rocky Mountain Regional Group for having the largest numerical increase.**
- **The Silver Gavel was presented to the Emerald Coast Regional Group for having the largest percentage increase.**
- **The Bronze Gavel was presented to the Florida Regional Group for having the greatest percentage increase for non-active members that become active members.**

Board of Director's Meeting August 13-14, 2017

- **Board approved minutes for Board of Directors' meeting held March 22-24, 2017 previously distributed by e-mail.**
- **The Life Membership Fund began the year with \$1,022,000 and ended the year with \$1,060,000. An increase of \$37,900, a percentage of 3.7%.**
- **The Investment Fund began the year with \$6,049,000 and ended the year with \$6,150,000. An increase of \$101,000, a percentage of 1.7%.**
- **Everyone is encouraged to sign up for the Amazon Smile Program at smile.amazon.com. This allows you to designate .05% of the sale to an organization of your choice. To date, BVA have received \$900 from this program.**
- **Board made a unanimous decision for the Executive Committee to No longer meet a day before the full Board. The meeting will now start on Sunday with the full Board, instead of Saturday.**
- **BVA received a total of 28 application packages for years 2017-18 for the Kathern F. Gruber and Thomas H. Miller Scholarships. Six winners were chosen for the Kathern F. Gruber scholarship at \$2,000 each and**

one for the Thomas H. Miller scholarship at \$1,000. Three alternates were also selected.

- Spring 2017 elections were held in Director Districts 5 and 6. Mr. Paul Kaminsky was re-elected in District 5 and Dr. Thomas Zampieri was re-elected in District 6 both for a three-year term of office.
- Talks are underway for upgrades with pharmacies at the VA that dispense script talk for prescriptions. This will make it easier for people to comprehend the information about their prescriptions. The costs for these upgrades are yet to be determined. Nothing will be done before the FY 2019 budget.
- The VA needs to take tighter control on behavioral problems with service dogs. A resolution will be presented during the convention to address the problem.
- A bill to extend the life of the Choice Program was signed into law by the President. This bill allows veterans enrolled in the VA Healthcare System to obtain care from community providers at the expense of the VA.
- Bill HR 3457 recently passed legislation that calls upon the Attorney General of the United States to investigate the government's failure to provide materials in accessible format for recipients of Medicare and Medicaid.
- The Caregiver Bill discussions are ongoing in DC to expand caregiver benefits for pre-911 veterans. Negotiations are in progress with the House and Senate Committees.
- Regional group leadership will be contacted to verify if members born between the time 1917 through 1927 is still part of their regional group. If they can't verify the member status, they will be removed from the

regional group roster. The President and/or Secretary will have 90 days to report back from the time they are notified.

- Board reviewed five proposed bylaw amendments, and a total of twenty-eight resolutions.

Executive Committee Meeting August 12, 2017

- The Approved budget for June 30, 2017 was \$3,840.2 in the General Fund. Actual Expenses was \$3,703.4. The Proposed budget for FYE 2018 is \$3,455.6. A decrease of 7.2%.
- The apportionment of investment income is \$45,300; this figure could change subject to the audit. The apportionment of annual dues is \$200.
- A grant for \$15,000 was added to the travel budget for Veterans Care Review. This covers travels to VISOR and BRCs.

BVA NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS AND OFFICE

The following are current full-time and part-time BVA employees:

<u>Position</u>	<u>Incumbent</u>
Executive Director	Joe Bogart
Convention Coordinator/HR Specialist	Krissi Spence-Gilbert
Administrative Director	Brigitte Jones
Director of Public Affairs	Melanie Brunson
Bookkeeper	Yvonne Preston
Administrative Assistant/Production Coordinator	Lindsay Ruais
Membership Coordinator	Cecilia Montenegro

Communications Specialist	Chester Curtis
Receptionist	Julian Sanders
National Training Coordinator	Wade Davis
Interim Director of Field Service Operations	Claudia Belk
Veteran Service Officers: Patrick Johnson; James Lewiski; Maria Ingegneri and Thedra Thornhill-Johnson	
Contractors for Direct Mail Program: James & Marilyn Dickman of Lewis Direct	
Contractor for Finance	Smith-Bucklin
Corporate Fundraiser	Thomas Tobin

REGIONAL GROUPS

As of June 30, 2018, BVA has 53 regional groups. Several regional groups are currently unstable. Mississippi Regional Group merged with Louisiana Regional Group in September 2017. North Texas Regional Group became members at large in October 2017, they are no longer merged with the Louisiana Regional Group. Regional groups that have formed chapters, or who are planning to form chapters in the future, are reminded that it is the policy of the BVA National Board of Directors that such groups amend their bylaws to include guidelines for controlling and administering their subordinate chapters.

Notices and forms for the submission of regional group financial reports for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2018 were mailed to all regional group treasurers around June 15, 2018. These reports are due at BVA National Headquarters no later than September 30, 2018. Delinquent regional groups are subject to being placed in a “NOT-IN-GOOD-STANDING” status in accordance with Section 13a and b of Article XIV (Regional Groups) of the BVA National Bylaws, as amended.

FIELD SERVICE PROGRAM

Empowering veterans with substantial vision loss access to services, education, and support. The BVA Field Service Program (FSP) Resource Center based in Alexandria, Virginia, is a one-stop shop for supporting all blind veterans and Volunteer National Service Officers (VNSOs) across the nation. The FSP Resource Center features a dedicated toll-free number and a dedicated FSP fax line for Resource Center Staff to assist in Veterans Benefit Claims and research local and national resources for veterans.

During FY 2018, the BVA Field Service staff and VNSO's recorded 275 Grants on Veterans' claims such as compensation and pension with a total of \$7,010,296.04 in retroactive payments. Currently the field Service Program is representing over 1923 Veterans receiving monthly benefits totaling over \$4,936,442 every month.

POA: BVA	MAY 2018	Compensation	TOTAL AWARDS MTH Summary	TOTAL BENEFITS MTH Summary	TOTAL BENEFITS FYTD Summary	AVERAGE PAYMENT MTH Summary
Station:						
USA			1,589	\$4,580,911	\$36,745,926	\$3,005
POA: BVA	MAY 2018	Improved Veteran Pension	TOTAL AWARDS MTH Summary	TOTAL BENEFITS MTH Summary	TOTAL BENEFITS FYTD Summary	AVERAGE PAYMENT MTH Summary
USA			248	\$244,921	\$2,032,618	\$1,033

The BVA Field Service Program has been through many changes during FY 2018, but striving to improve services with the resources available. One of the main changes in the BVA Resource Center was the purging of veterans' paper folders which were taking up lots of unnecessary office space. This purge saved us in expenditures of office supplies such as paper and ink cartridges. Most folders were already in our paperless eFolders that we have created on the VA's public folder dedicated to BVA. We continue to process claims with limited personnel, therefore, we have shortened the call center hours in order to allow time for processing forms and development of claims. We take calls from 10:00am to 4:00pm and use one hour prior to the start of the call center hours to review emails, voicemails, and work on unfinished work, and the last hour of the day after the call center is closed, we finalize any unfinished forms, emails, and narrations for the day.

The BVA Resource Center has been split into two processing sections, the initial intake of development of claims which is covered by James Lewiski

and Maria Ingegneri. The second section handles our appeals, which is covered by Thedra Thornhill-Johnson and Patrick Johnson. The claims caseload is 298 for initial claims and 168 for appeals, where each appeal service officer has about 84 claims they're working on individually. Our daily rating decision reviews are done by the FSP director and one of the initial claims' development officer, to allow opportunity for training.

Training is a continuous task for the Field Service Program, therefore, we will begin a train the trainer format in which everyone in the BVA Resource Center will have the opportunity to train their fellow co-workers in a designated topic in VA compensation and pension benefits. The goal is to have everyone cross-trained in working any claim. Currently Patrick Johnson is the only service officer handling hearings at the Board of Veterans Appeals, therefore, we will have the other service officers begin shadowing him during local hearings, so others can represent our BVA clients. One of our biggest challenge is having all service officers performing all duties requiring the same job descriptions for all BVA Resource Center staff.

Last year, there was a proposal to have veterans who were in receipt of individual unemployability benefits to have this benefit terminate once the veteran reaches retirement age at 65 years of age and just receive regular SSI benefits and VA compensation. This caused an uproar in the VSO community, and we were sent a list of all veterans who were in receipt of IU benefits and whom we had POA representation. The total veterans we had in this report were 206. We sent out a letter to 180 of these veterans who had not filed any claims since 2012. The letter explained to them that they might benefit from a review from one of our VSOs and possibly be eligible for an increase in compensation. This resulted in several increases in veteran compensation claims.

BVA continues to build the BVA volunteer program. Over half of the Veterans Administration Voluntary Services Departments in the Medical Facilities do not have BVA representation. We should have a Representative and Deputy Representative assigned in each facility working with Veterans Administration voluntary services to create programs for Blinded veterans. As our membership is significantly decreasing it is imperative to have BVA representation in as many facilities as possible empowering blind veterans from local programs and educating potential members on the benefits of BVA. If we could work together with our BVA Regional Groups in recruiting volunteers, that would help grow this program.

In Fiscal Year 2018 the BVA had 31 Representatives and 12 Deputy Representatives and 103 volunteers donating over 13,031 hours in 54 VA medical facilities. We should have a Representative and Deputy Representative assigned in each facility working with voluntary services to create programs for Blinded veterans.

The Veterans Care Review Partnership continues to be a collaborative effort between the BVA and the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) to share best practices. BVA visits BRC's and VISOR clinics to evaluate the full curriculum of care for visually impaired and blind veterans and to share the findings with staff and administration to promote and expand the facility's successful procedures. This also affords a cooperative exchange to find and alleviate issues and take advantage of existing opportunities to make the facility as productive and safe as it can be for blinded veterans. BVA provides a comprehensive report to each facility and VA Central Office with written recommendations.

CONTRIBUTIONS, FUND-RAISING, AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

In FY17, BVA raised \$36,795 in online gifts compared to \$31,509 in FY16. The average gift increased from \$38 to \$49.46, and the total number of gifts (744) increased compared to 715 gifts in FY16. Approximately 67% of the donors covered the 3% processing fee in FY16, while 64% covered it in FY15.

BVA's presence on social media grew steadily in FY16, with consistent audience engagement with posts. BVA now has 4,908 Facebook fans compared to 4,783 in FY16 and 4,370 Twitter followers compared to 4,065 in FY16. Engagement with the Facebook audience has improved, with posts averaging more than 300 views. Social media posts focus on informative content about veterans' issues, news regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs, BVA activities and events, and some fundraising requests.

BVA's monthly e-newsletter campaign informs supporters, donors, and members about recent BVA activities and provides a digest of monthly news shared on social media. The donor-targeted newsletter has 2,328 subscribers currently, up from 1,839 in FY16; and an average readership of 20% monthly. Each e-newsletter contains educational information about blindness issues as well as a donation button with tracking code. Fundraising emails are sent out over the winter holidays, on Blinded Veterans Day (March 28th), Memorial Day, July 4, Veterans Day, and on other

random occasions. These emails are coordinated with the Direct Mail campaign to maintain consistent messaging, and some are also featured on the BVA website. There are also 900 BVA members subscribed to the members-edition of the newsletter, which contains the same content without any fundraising asks.

BVA Regional Group Leaders, BVA volunteers, and BVA members of all ages shared their personal stories to inspire support for BVA in fundraising letters and newsletter articles to donors. Feature stories included BVA members' activities: employment, adaptive sports, hikes, programs, and events. A special issue of the BVA donor newsletter and appeal formally introduced the new Executive Director and his strong message of teamwork and unity. Special Disaster Emergency Fund appeals featured BVA veterans affected by the recent hurricanes.

Targeted communications encouraged member recruitment (including affiliate memberships), planned giving through bequests and charitable gift annuities, and specialized communications to major donors. A pro-active message (stating that BVA does not use telemarketers) has been added to communications in an effort to strengthen trust and stem potential confusion generated by other VSOs' negative media coverage.

BVA's online reputation is being tracked on third-party watchdog and advocacy sites such as Charity Navigator and GuideStar. As almost all third-party charity websites, including nonprofit rating website Great Nonprofits, are powered by the GuideStar database, updated financial information is posted as soon as it becomes available. Thanks in part to a re-assessment of their rating guidelines and in part to improved financial efficiency on the part of BVA, Charity Navigator rates the organization at two stars. BVA also continues to participate in the Better Business Bureau-Wise Giving Alliance and displays the BBB seal on its website and in its literature.

BVA qualified to receive CFC contributions again in FY16 and is listed in the Military, Family and Veterans Service Organizations of America section of the CFC guide. Total pledges for 2017 CFC campaign were \$8,322.91, a downturn from the previous year. However, BVA did not spend any money on CFC advertisements in 2017 as had been done during previous campaigns, which could account for some of the decrease.

In FY17, amongst others, BVA was awarded a grant from the Allergan Foundation for \$10,000 in support of Operation Peer Support, and \$19,649

from US Embassy London for the recognition of the centennial anniversary of World War I.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Over the 2017-2018 fiscal year, the Blinded Veterans Association has experienced many changes. The most notable are the personnel shifts related to the position of Executive Director, the reduction in the position of Field Services Director and outsourcing the financial department. Leadership changes and other employee turnover created some unique challenges like combined duties and job descriptions, steep learning curves coupled with increased stress and workload on existing employees. As of this report, HQ continues stabilizing from the upheaval of turnover which helps increase morale.

Since starting in the position on March 5th, 2018, the Blinded Veterans Association Executive Director, Joe Bogart, worked to restore local, national and international connections and relationships that faltered during the underlap of Executive Directors. In the past four months, he's met with the North American Regional Group of the World Blind Union, the U.K. Surgeon General, Blinded Veterans U.K. staff and members, the AFB CEO, representatives from NIB, military senior leaders, VA and BRS senior leaders and several companies and non-profits that support the blind and visually impaired.

Additionally, he's worked with board members to foster new relations with major organizations like Essilor, McKesson and Bosch and Lomb. He's used his personal contacts to reach out to Sikorsky and Vectrus to build the BVA's network and brand recognition. Joe is a Board Member for Camp Hope and is working with them and other Veteran Support Non-Profits to advocate, collaboration and coordinate future opportunities to all our members.

In February, the BVA Board contracted with Smith-Bucklin to outsource National HQ's financial department as a way to cut expenses. As the BVA's new financial service, Smith-Bucklin initially identified ways to save over \$100k in salaries and contractors for the next fiscal year. Since then, we've discovered thousands more to save to include reducing the cost for our auditing company and accounting software.

In March, the Board of Directors officially ended the BVA's Blind Hockey Program due to lack of funding. Additionally, BVA Vice-President Paul Mimms

provided our annual congressional testimony to very positive results. During the following week, we conducted our congressional office calls and expanded on the verbal and written testimony provided by VP Mimms. This combined with our visits to the Department of Veterans Affairs where we painted a vivid picture of key issues our membership has with their local VA facilities.

The remainder of the spring led to visits of possible future convention locations, and of the Executive Director continuing to build ties with other blind and visually impaired organizations. In May, the Executive Director joined Wade Davis during the review of the Augusta Blind Rehabilitation Center. This led to candid discussions with the VAMC Director about shortfalls and recommended solutions to that BRC. Our BVA representatives received an overwhelming show of support by the Augusta VAMC Director to the point of being invited back in six months for another review of the facility to ensure they are improving as we recommended.

In May, the Executive Director attended the World Blind Union Conference in Ottawa Canada. During this meeting he raised the concern for support to Blinded Veterans throughout the world. At this time, the WBU does not advocate for Veterans suffering from vision loss in other countries but will examine if it is a concern needing addressed.

On Memorial Day, The Executive Director joined the BVA President, Joe Parker, at Arlington National Cemetery to place a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown. They were accompanied by the Interim Director of Field Service Operations, Claudia Belk, the Administrative Director, Brigitte Jones, and the Communications Specialist, Chester Curtis. Two BVA members served as color guards during the ceremony, Michaun Harrison and James Baldwin.

June wrapped up the fiscal year with the Administrative and Executive Directors signing with a realtor to reinvigorate our search for a new permanent headquarters building. Also, in June, our Life Membership Fund Committee finalized switching fund managers to facilitate a more conservative return in an attempt to provide our regional groups more predictable apportionments.

The Executive Director identified three areas to improve over the coming years: fundraising, programs and active membership. All three are connected and can improve and grow by marketing the BVA through public education and advocating for our organization. During the coming years, the National

HQ's will work with the Board and membership to improve in all these areas.

DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

For this department, the past year has been one of many changes. Our work has been greatly impacted by changes within BVA and outside it. Some of these changes have been positive, and others are still under way, with the result that their impact has not yet been determined. In either case, we've been busy and intellectually challenged. A summary of the activities that we have been involved in follows.

As you know, one of the changes that occurred this year within BVA itself was the merging of the Communications and Government Relations programs into one department, which was renamed Public Affairs. On the communications side of the department, we are incredibly fortunate that Chet Curtis joined our staff in late November. He was able to hit the ground running and kept the BVA Bulletins coming out on schedule every other month. When Rushil Raman left BVA in March, Chet also took over production of our electronic newsletters. He still finds time to maintain BVA's social media presence and has also done much of the work keeping the BVA website up-to-date. It is our hope that during the months ahead, we can develop more strategic plans for each of these types of publications so that the purpose each one serves within BVA's media strategy is understood and utilized to best advantage by all.

Our goals with regard to podcast production were put on the back burner during the first few months of the year due, in large part, to a lack of staff hours to work on them. However, Chet Curtis has conducted several interviews in recent weeks, which he was able to post on the BVA website, Facebook and LinkedIn, in podcast format. We are hoping to expand the variety of podcast we make available, and also revive the "Focus on The Hill" podcast beginning this Fall.

During my last report to the national board in March, I discussed the meetings that the members of BVA's Legislative Committee and I held at the VA and on Capitol Hill. This year's meetings were very positive. The issues discussed in these meetings covered policy areas that were dealt with in our 2017 convention resolutions, as well as the legislative areas we covered in testimony before the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees again this year.

Over the months that followed, we have held follow-up meetings in the offices of most members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Much of the discussion has focused around insuring that VA's effort to modernize its information technology infrastructure include adequate attention to compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. Modernization of the VA's information technology infrastructure is a top priority for the House VA Committee and has been for the VA Secretary as well. I am happy to report that both Chairman Roe and Ranking Member Walz, of the House VA Committee, have committed to helping us insure that VA websites are accessible. They have asked VA IT office personnel to report to them on the status of Section 508 compliance as part of their reports on the status of general IT updates. As a result of our discussions with committee staff, the House committee's Healthcare Subcommittee invited VA staff and contractors who work on the Crisis Line to participate in a conference call with them and answer questions about what is being done to address the accessibility concerns we raised in our testimony. These involved features that made it difficult for users of screen readers to get to the VA Crisis Line from VA's website. The meeting went well, and it is our understanding that the issues we pointed out have now been fixed.

In addition to oversight from Congress on Section 508 compliance issues, Claudia Belk has organized regular meetings with staff and contractors from VA's Section 508 office to discuss addressing specific issues encountered by resource center staff. Melanie Brunson has participated in several of these meetings as well. Participants from the Section 508 Compliance office have been very responsive. Although issues remain, we continue to have a good working relationship with this office and a number of improvements to VA websites have been made. It is our hope that we will soon begin seeing fewer issues to bring to their attention, as they get better at identifying them before things roll out rather than waiting for us to point them out afterwards.

We also regularly remind both the VA and Congress of the need to begin taking steps to give VA the capability to produce documents in accessible formats for veterans, as well as for VA employees, who cannot read traditional print. Unfortunately, there has been quite a bit of turnover among personnel in the VA Office of Information Technology, including the senior leadership positions, and that has impacted the office's work on this issue. However, we are optimistic that some progress is being made. We hope to have more details to share once some senior leadership positions have been filled.

Meanwhile, we continue our collaboration with other organizations on behalf of additional items on BVA's legislative and policy agenda. We continue to work with the National Alliance for Eye and Vision Research (NAEVR), The American Optometric Association (AOA) and the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) in support of a programmatic request for an increase in funding for the Department of Defense Vision Research Program from \$10 million to \$20 million. We are hopeful that this funding increase will be approved by Congress in the weeks ahead, so it will take effect in October to fund research that will address gaps that currently exist in the field of battlefield eye trauma research. Congress plans to work through at least part of the month of August to deal with appropriation bills. If action is taken on these, or other legislation by the time BVA convenes in August, we will let you know during our report at convention.

We are stepping up our work with other coalitions of veteran service organizations and disability advocacy groups to advance additional policy changes that impact people who are blind. For instance, about this time last year, we joined a coalition coordinated by Paralyzed Veterans of America to advocate for a major update of the Air Carriers Access Act. This is the law that covers the obligations of airlines to accommodate passengers who have disabilities. Although the group was not successful in getting Congress to approve comprehensive legislation, we have been meeting with airlines individually to educate them about our concerns. Additionally, the coalition has been meeting with the U.S. Department of Transportation in an attempt to address some issues through revisions to regulations. The group meets monthly at PVA headquarters.

We also joined with other veteran service organizations in urging Congress to pass the VA Mission Act earlier this year. We are pleased to report that this effort was successful, and that legislation is now the law. We are monitoring VA's preparations for its implementation very closely.

Speaking of collaboration in support of significant legislation that was approved during the past year, we are very pleased to report that there has been significant progress toward insuring U.S. participation in a treaty that has the potential to greatly increase the number of books available to BVA members in accessible formats. We have joined with the national leading blindness organizations in supporting ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Materials for People who are Blind, Visually Impaired, or Have Other Print Reading Disabilities. Just a few days ago, the U.S. Senate voted to ratify that treaty, and to approve legislation making some

changes to U.S. Copyright law that are needed to comply with treaty provisions. This legislation now goes to the House of Representatives. We are confident that it will be approved by the House as well, since it has the support of the Association of American Publishers, the Authors Guild, and virtually all of the organizations involved in intellectual property rights across the country, along with the organizations of and for the blind. As of this writing, the House has not put the measure on its calendar, so while we await this, we are working with the other organizations to educate members of the House about the merits of the legislation.

Finally, we are now a part of two advisory committees that meet regularly with senior leaders of the Defense Health Agency. Their Veteran Service Organization, Military Service Organization Working Group meets monthly to receive updates on various programs administered by DHA, and I have begun attending these meetings regularly. There is also a quarterly meeting for executives of Military and Veteran Service organizations, which I attended last year, and Joe Bogart has now started attending. Among other things, this agency is now the home of the Vision Centers of Excellence (VCE). The VCE was moved there earlier this year. We are hoping to leverage our membership in these groups to obtain more regular and comprehensive dialogue with DHA on the long-term work of the VCE. As of this writing, we are working on arrangements for a meeting with the officials who are directly responsible for oversight of the VCE now. We will let you know when this meeting has been scheduled.

We are also continuing our efforts to educate members of Congress, their staff members, and VA leaders about other emerging policy issues. These include the need for improved access to local transportation administered by the VA for veterans who are blind, and the need to investigate a possible link between exposure to toxic substances such as Agent Orange and the development of Choroidal Melanoma Eye Cancer among Vietnam veterans. We are hopeful that once key leadership positions at the VA are filled, there will be progress on addressing each of these issues. Another issue, which was discussed in detail in one of the new resolutions adopted by BVA during the convention in 2017, concerned the increasing instances of poorly trained, or outright fraudulent service animals being brought to VA medical centers and allowed to disrupt the work of other service animals. We are pleased that both the VA and members of Congress have taken an interest in this issue and we look forward to working with officials from both bodies in the months ahead to find ways to protect service animals and their handlers from the harm caused by those who abuse access rights.

I continue working with the Advisory Committee for the Center on Blindness and Low Vision at Mississippi State University. This committee has another two years of work ahead. This year's work included a two-day in-person meeting at Mississippi State, as well as quarterly conference calls. There are six research projects under way related to various aspects of blind rehabilitation. The work appears to be going well and we anticipate some useful information will come out of this research once these projects are completed.

We will continue to provide updates on all of this work as they become available. As always, please let us know if you have questions, or if you think we should be covering something that we have failed to mention in this report. We value your feedback.

COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT

BVA BULLETIN

General Background

Begun in 1946 just one year into BVA's operations as an organization, the BVA Bulletin is at the center of all of the Association's communications and public relations efforts nationally. The Bulletin has, as its focus, issues and events affecting blinded veterans. It also covers general topics that relate to the entire veteran community and, from time to time, topics regarding blindness and visual impairment that are not specific to veterans.

Although the objective of the BVA Bulletin is to inform and educate active members, the BVA regional group officers, VA BRS personnel, and the BVA general membership nonetheless use the Bulletin as an educational and public relations tool as they meet blinded veterans who are not yet BVA members. The publication is also sent to the following: libraries; resource centers; medical services organizations; agencies that serve the blind nationally, locally, and on state/regional levels; and state offices of veterans' affairs. It is mailed via Free Matter for the Blind whenever it is directed to a legally blind individual or to a private organization or public-sector agency serving the blind. A nonprofit rate is used to send the publication to other organizations and individuals.

After 12 years as a quarterly publication, the Bulletin was restored three

years ago to the distribution schedule that it enjoyed prior to FY 2004. Six issues, beginning with the July-August 2017 issue, were produced during FY 2018.

In the final issue of FY 2014, the print version of the publication added Voiceye, a system designed to make printed documents accessible using a dense, two-dimensional barcode. The Voiceye code was added to the top right portion of each page of the Bulletin through a software add-in. The encoded information can then be pulled into the user's device when the code, allowing the pages to be converted from text to speech or magnified in ten different levels and five high contrast modes. The Voiceye codes continued to be added in Bulletin issues throughout FY 2018. A brief description of Voiceye and its use was added for the first time to page 2 of the Bulletin in the January-February 2016 issue and has continued ever since.

The typesetting, layout, design, and print functions of the FY 2018 issues of the Bulletin were accomplished by Lewis Advertising of Baltimore, Maryland. Its work on the Bulletin actually commenced with the May-June 2016 issue.

Bulletin Statistics

The Bulletin editor requested the printing of 7,500 copies of the July-August 2017 issue, 6,900 for the September-October issue, 6,650 for the November-December issue, 6,700 for the January-February issue, 7,150 for the March-April issue, and 6,600 for the May-June issue, an average of 6,933. This is 1,000 less than the 2017 average of 7,900. The cut in number of printed copies is due in large part to the number of reported deaths of BVA members, the cleaning up of bad addresses, and the conversion of hundreds of BVA members to reading the Bulletin online or digitally now that the publication is available in five alternate formats.

An audio recording of each issue of the Bulletin was also produced in FY 2018. The recordings were duplicated by AudioVideoData.com in Chevy Chase, Maryland. The narrator was Bruce Moyer for each of the six. BVA produced an average of 203 compact disks containing the recordings for all issues. This is an increase of 86 over 2017.

An electronic version of the Bulletin could be viewed on the BVA website. This version was available at approximately the same time as delivery or availability of the print and audio versions. The online version

provides color photos in contrast to the black and white traditionally found in the print version. Statistics associated with user visits to the Bulletin page on the website indicate that online readership continued to grow.

The Bulletin is also available by email. Recipients may request either a PDF version, which provides a document that appears exactly as it does in hard copy form, or a Word document similar to the audio script that includes picture descriptions. Beginning with the March-April 2016 issue, all BVA members for whom the Association has an email address received the Word document of the Bulletin by email automatically. As of June 30, 2018, there were some 1,200 individuals receiving the Word document and 70 individuals on the PDF list.

Brochures and Other Promotional Materials

In July 2018, BVA produced 2,500 copies of the trifold, color brochure containing the following statement on the cover: Thousands of veterans with impaired vision have found understanding, support, and new purpose through BVA. The previously employed brochure became outdated during Fiscal Year 2018 and has been entirely discontinued as of July 2018. The old brochure was unnecessarily hefty and dense, which also made it more expensive to produce. The current brochure is much lighter, concise, and cheaper to produce, which helped cut down on costs and production time. At this time, the White Cane Day specific pamphlets are still in production, but they may also be replaced by a similarly new version before October 2018.

The text of the new brochure has been done in large print across a trifold and it sports six carefully selected photographs, which showcase the range of influence our organization has from congressional hearings to outdoor expeditions.

KATHERN F. GRUBER AND THOMAS H. MILLER SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

The Blinded Veterans Association awards seven (7) scholarships each year. There are six (6) scholarships for \$2,000 each available through the Kathern F. Gruber Scholarship Program and one (1) for \$1,000 offered through the Thomas H. Miller Scholarship Program.

The scholarships are open to dependent children, grandchildren and spouses of blinded veterans to include Active-Duty blinded service

members of the U.S. Armed Forces. The blindness may either be service-connected or non-service-connected and membership in BVA is not a prerequisite. A BVA Scholarship Committee comprised of three volunteers, none of whom is a blinded veteran, reviews the scholarship applications and chooses the seven primary recipients based on “best qualified”. The Committee also selects three alternates.

EQUIPMENT AND FURNITURE

We purchased one computer and two laptops with OPS support and one computer purchase from BVA’s budget for national office staff. We also received one donated computer from David Fox. In addition, a new monitor was purchased for the executive director. There was no new furniture purchased during this fiscal year.

FINANCES

The annual BVA audited financial statement for FY 2018 and the approved budget for FY 2019 will be appended to the hard-copy edition of the convention report as Appendix B and the approved Budget for FY 2019 as Appendix C after approval.

CONCLUSION

Given the numerous changes that have been made within BVA Headquarters over this past fiscal year, the National Board of Directors has continued to provide sound financial management and has been acting very prudent and responsible in their decision making and oversight since the adjournment of BVA’s 72nd National Convention. The BVA investment program remains consistently strong. Your National Board of Directors deeply appreciates the support of the membership along with the National Headquarters and field staff and looks forward to serving you during the coming year.

For the National Board of Directors,

Joe Parker
National President and
Chairman of the Board

JP:bj

APPENDICES:

A - Membership Statistics

B - Audited Financial Statement for FY 2019 (July 1, 2018 – June 30, 2019)

C - Approved Budget for FY- 2019 (July 1, 2018 – June 30, 2019)

D - Composition of six Director Districts