

BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION
76th NATIONAL CONVENTION

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE NATIONAL
BOARD OF DIRECTORS

FISCAL YEAR 2021
(JULY 1, 2020 - JUNE 30, 2021)

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**BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION
76th NATIONAL CONVENTION
ALEXANDRIA, VA
AUGUST 16-20, 2021**

**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE 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, 2021. The National Board is pleased to report that overall, BVA is in a very good financial position, and we continuously look for ways to strengthen BVA's financial position.

Below are some highlights over the past year.

- 1) BVA's 76th National Convention will be a virtual meeting hosted by the national headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia. The convention dates are August 16-20, 2021.**

- 2) Spring 2021 elections were held in Director Districts 1, 2, and 4. Ballots were opened and counted on July 15, 2021, for nominees Leon Collier and Warner Murray for a seat in District 1. Leon Collier was duly elected. Brian Harris in District 2 and Kenneth Asam in District 4 both ran unopposed.**

- 3) The Ryan Kules and Paul Benne Specially Adaptive Housing Improvement Act of 2019: This legislation will allow potentially eligible veterans to receive funding to convert their homes with technology needed for independent living. New regulations increased the grant amount from \$63,780 to nearly \$100,000. And generally, will increase**

annually based on Cost-of-Living Adjustment.

4) **The VA Contracting Preference Consistency Act:** This legislation preserves the Ability One contracting program, which protects meaningful employment opportunities for blind and severely handicapped individuals across the country.

5) **BVA's 77th convention** will be held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Washington, DC during the period August 18-28, 2022. The 78th convention is scheduled to be held at the Marriott St. Louis Grand Hotel in St. Louis, MO during the period August 11-20, 2023.

6) **We currently have a total of eight (8) full-time employees and two (2) contractors.**

7) **We said our goodbyes to Yvonne Preston, Laureen Bowles, Kylie Fitzgerald, Charles Reynolds, and Loreal Hamilton in the first half-year period of 2021. These changes were mainly due to cost-cutting measures, new phone automations and adapting to new technology.**

8) **BVA received the Bosma Community Partner Award for 2021 for its contributions to the blind community of Indiana.**

NATIONAL OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS FY20-21

National President and Chairman, Dr. Thomas Zampieri, Pearland, TX

National Vice-President, Joseph McNeil, Columbus, GA

National Secretary, Daniel Wallace, Grand Junction, CO

National Treasurer, Elizabeth Holmes, Midland, GA

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

Director District 2, Brian Harris, South Holland, IL

Director District 3, Monaca Gilmore, Knightdale, NC

Director District 4, Rae Hail, Deer Park, WA

Director District 5, Darryl Goldsmith, Pensacola, FL

Director District 6, Kevin Jackson, Austin, TX

National Chaplain, Dr. Ron Lester, Tucson, AZ

National Sergeant-at-Arms, Kennan Horn, Edmond, OK

COMMITTEES AND REPRESENTATIVES

The following appointments have been made by the BVA National President:

Executive Committee:

Dr. Thomas Zampieri, Chairman; Joseph McNeil, Daniel Wallace, Elizabeth Holmes, and Kevin Jackson

Audit Committee:

Daniel Wallace, Chairman; Elizabeth Holmes, Monaca Gilmore, and Kevin Jackson

Life Membership Fund Board of Trustees:

Daniel Wallace, Chairman; Joseph McNeil, Kennan Horn, Elizabeth Holmes, Monaca Gilmore, Paul Kaminsky, HQ Staff Donald Overton, and Sunny Patel, CPA

Government Relations Committee:

Dr. Thomas Zampieri, Chairman; Joseph McNeil, Daniel Wallace, Col. Robert Mazzoli, Russell Nelson and HQ Staff Donald Overton, James Vale, and Erin McConnell

Investment Fund Board of Trustees:

Daniel Wallace, Chairman; Joseph McNeil, Kennan Horn, Elizabeth Holmes, R. Garret Bolks, HQ Staff Donald Overton, and Sunny Patel, CPA

Scholarship Committee:

Rosalind McQueen, Joe Amerling, and Dr. Mike Gandy

Blind Rehabilitation Committee:

Joseph McNeil, Chairman; Rae Hail, Kevin Jackson, Monaca Gilmore, Carlos Pere, Stephen Butler, Wade Davis, and HQ Staff James Vale

Membership/Regional Group Committee:

Kevin Jackson, Chairman; Elizabeth Holmes, Monaca Gilmore, Dennis O'Connell, Rae Hail, Joseph McNeil, Brian Harris, Carlos Pere, Tracy Ferro, Ron Lester, and HQ Staff Maria Ingegneri and Charles Reynolds

Fundraising Committee:

Dr. Thomas Zampieri, Chairman; Danny Wallace, Joseph McNeil, Elizabeth Holmes, Monaca Gilmore, and HQ Staff Kylie Fitzgerald, Andrea Malmer, and Donald Overton

Veterans Service Committee:

Joseph McNeil, Chairman; Daniel Wallace, Dennis O'Connell, Richard Lane, Scott Scieszinski, Stephen Butler, Wade Davis, Tracy Ferro, and HQ Staff Donald Overton and James Vale

Convention/Education Committee:

Joseph McNeil, Chairman; Margarine Beaman, Dennis O'Connell, Elizabeth Holmes, Richard Lane, Darryl Goldsmith, Larry Bustetter, Rae Hail, Brian Harris, Timothy Hornik, and HQ Staff Charles Reynolds and Donald Overton

International Ocular Research Committee:

Dr. Thomas Zampieri, Chairman; Col. Robert Mazzoli, Daniel Wallace, Joseph McNeil, Dr. Renata Gomes, and HQ Staff Donald Overton and Andrea Malmer

Operation Peer Support Committee:

Kennan Horn, Chairman; Steve Baskis, Lonnie Bedwell, Tina Lemus, Scott Scieszinski, Brian Harris, Eric Martz, and Danny Wallace, voting members; Dr. Thomas Zampieri and Joe Amerling, non-voting members; and HQ Staff Charles Reynolds

Communications Committee:

Elizabeth Holmes, Chairperson; Scott Scieszinski, Steve Baskis, Eric

Marts, Kevin Jackson, Brian Harris, Joseph McNeil, Tracy Ferro, and HQ Staff Stuart Nelson and Kylie Fitzgerald, and Cheryl Gajadhar, Webmaster

Women’s Veteran Committee:

Monaca Gilmore, Chairperson; Michaun Harrison, Marlene Davis-Lilly, Elizabeth Holmes, Jeanie Murphy, and HQ Staff Erin McConnell

Guide Dog Committee:

Rae Hail, Chairperson; Paul Mimms, Irena Howard, Gary Traynor, Ann Chiappetta, Patti Hail, Wade Davis, and Timothy Hornik

Ombudsman:

Paul Mimms, Chairman; Kennan Horn and Ron Lester

Assistant National Treasurers and Assistant National Secretary to the Board:

- **Donald Overton, Executive Director/Asst. National Treasurer**
- **Stuart Nelson, Director of Public Relations/Asst. National Treasurer**
- **Brigitte Jones, Administrative Director/Asst. National Secretary**

**BVA NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS OFFICE STAFF
FY20-21**

<u>Position</u>	<u>Incumbent</u>
Executive Director	Donald Overton
Administrative Director	Brigitte Jones
Administrative Specialist	Laureen Bowles
Bookkeeper	Yvonne Preston
National Service Director	James Vale
Government Relations Specialist	Erin McConnell

National Service Officer	Charles Reynolds
Appeals & Claims	Loreal Hamilton
Public Relations Director	Stuart Nelson
Public Relations Specialist	Kylie Fitzgerald
Membership Coordinator	Maria Ingegneri
Andrea Malmer	Development Coordinator
Contractor for Finance	Smith-Bucklin
Contractor for Website	Current - Jordan Chesley Former – Cheryl Gajadhar

MEETINGS AND ACTIONS OF NATIONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Board of Director's Meeting March 9-10, 2021

- **The Veterans Service Program launched its Ambassador training program in mid-March. They will serve as liaisons for blinded veterans across the country at inpatient and outpatient medical facilities.**
- **BVA President Dr. Thomas Zampieri testified before a joint session of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs on March 3, 2021.**
- **BVA's Scholarship program is entering its 38th year for the Kathern F. Gruber Scholarship and the 9th year for the Thomas H. Miller Scholarship.**
- **Currently, we have 45 regional groups. Measures remain ongoing to promote stronger contact within regional groups in becoming more active and being more efficient. Support and services to our regional**

groups is limitless. Most importantly, we want our regional groups to remain in a “good standing status.”

- **Board discussed ways to manage the 76th virtual convention in August and procedures for registration and voting. They plan to have Zoom education sessions and vendor presentations.**
- **Operating Revenue for FY21 was budgeted to be \$1.69 million; this amount is lower by \$536,000 as compared to the FY20 budget. This was due to BVA not hosting several annual events. Operating Expenses for FY21 are budgeted at \$2 million; this amount is \$771,000 less than the FY20 budget. Fundraising costs were less in FY21, compared to FY20 by \$142,000.**
- **Life Membership Fund Account FY21 – The portfolio value as of December 31, 2020 increased from \$1 million to nearly \$1.08 million. The projected income distribution for FY21 is \$39,600.**
- **Investment Account FY21 – As of June 30, 2020, the value was \$7.7 million. As of December 31, 2020, the value was \$8.1 million.**
- **Budget for FY22 – We are projecting a gross revenue of \$1.2 million, the majority deriving from development and fundraising and potential revenue from the annual virtual convention. Additional revenue would be driven by the two rental spaces, recently on the market. This would generate \$143,000 in annual rent.**
- **Revenue for FY22 – projected to be down by \$222,000 compared to FY21 forecast. We are budgeting \$1.7 million in operating expenses for FY22. We have cut expenses by another \$200,000 compared to FY21 budget. The proposed operating deficit for FY22 is \$512,000.**
- **Niki Sandlan, Blind Rehabilitation Service Director, from the Department of Veterans Affairs along with team consultants, Bobbi Hillen, Ella Hart, Michael Bastien, Rosalyn Conanan, Esteban Zuniga,**

and Michael Williams, presented status reports from their different regions.

Board Meeting Minutes in FY's 20-21 Multiple Dates

- **The Wisconsin, Inc. Regional Group members have decided to dissolve the regional group due to inactivity. Effective June 30, 2021.**
- **The Rio Grande Regional Group members have decided to dissolve the regional group and turn in their charter, books, and finances due to inactiveness. Effective April 27, 2021.**
- **Board made the decision to suspend award nominations for the year 2021 due to members and volunteers being isolated because of the pandemic. It prevented any activity from regional groups or local VAMCs. BOD meeting on December 4, 2020.**
- **The VA has decided to make changes to Caregiver Regulations, tightening the restrictions on who is eligible. These benefit changes will negatively impact our veterans. BOD meeting on December 4, 2020.**
- **Timothy Hornik resigned as Director District 2 on December 4, 2020 due to other commitments. He recommended Brian Harris, VP of Illinois RG, as his replacement until elections in spring 2021. Board approved unanimously. BOD meeting on December 4, 2020.**
- **Board approved selecting one (1) candidate for a Certificate of Appreciation (COA), starting the year 2021. BOD meeting June 17, 2020.**

Board of Director's Meeting August 14-15, 2020

- **Board approved all prior meeting minutes distributed by e-mail.**

- **Investments have appreciated due to a strong stock market. BVA's portfolio has increased by \$300,000 from June of last year. This year's apportionment distributions to regional groups will be nearly \$43,000.**
- **As of June 30, 2020, BVA had Net Assets of \$11 million. Of that, \$2.2 million is unrestricted Net Assets and \$8.7 million in investments, which includes both Investment and Life Membership funds. We collected \$1.2 million in Revenue and had Expenses of \$2.1 million. The overall operations deficit is \$849,000 for FY20. The budget for FY20 was \$2.8 million. Operation Peer Support had restricted Net Assets of \$145,000.**
- **Direct Mail Revenue in FY20 was \$476,000. Expenses were \$241,000. The Direct Mail budget will increase by \$150,000 to cover expenses for future mail campaigns.**
- **BVA's annual audit began on September 8, 2020, with Hertzbach & Company.**
- **Presentations were given by National Consultants from the Department of Veterans Affairs Blind Rehabilitation Service: Niki Sandlan, Blind Rehabilitation Service Director, along with team consultants. They did a question-and-answer session for their presentations.**
- **Membership count as of June 30, 2020 was 7,478. We show 318 joined between the period July 1, 2019 to June 29, 2020. Deceased member count was 481. We anticipate that numbers will become fewer as we continue to scrub the member database.**
- **BVA received a total of 2 application packages for the 2020-21 academic years. Both applicants were awarded a Kathern F. Gruber scholarship for \$2,000 each. Only one applicant accepted the**

scholarship award. The other applicant chose to decline the scholarship.

- **Board approved Rae Hail on an interim basis as Director District 4 to replace Jhennicea Morrow.**
- **Board approved/recommended a bylaw change for a veteran with low vision to become a member of BVA.**
- **Spring 2020 elections were held in Director Districts 5 and 6. Darryl Goldsmith was elected in District 5 and Kevin Jackson was elected in District 6.**
- **The Major General Melvin J. Maas Award for Professional Achievement was awarded to Thomas H. Miller of Washington, DC.**
- **The David L. Schnair Volunteer Service Award for 2020 was awarded to Dennis Currie of Tucson, AZ. This award recognizes an individual for his/her extraordinary volunteer work on behalf of blinded veterans.**
- **The Irving Diener Award for 2020 was awarded to Tracy Ferro of Biloxi, MS. This award is presented to an individual for his/her outstanding contribution to the growth and development of their regional group.**
- **Certificates of Appreciation were awarded to Marianne Ryan from Cleveland, OH, Tara Travland from Central, TX, and Debra Gilley from Biloxi, MS. The award recognizes individuals, groups, employers, etc., who have provided outstanding services to blinded veterans and/or to BVA at the national level.**

OPERATION PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM EVENT

- In January 2021, the Operation Peer Support Program together with Steamboat Adaptive Recreational Sports (STARS) in Colorado hosted six blinded veterans from four states as they participated in skiing and snowboarding events. This event created a real sense of camaraderie among the group.

WOMEN'S VETERAN GROUP

- The Women's Veteran Group held their first ever virtual retreat in early March 2021. This was a very meaningful event. The women were able to share experiences and resources and it gave them the opportunity to learn from each other, and engage in a variety of activities, to include music therapy, relaxation, and friendly conversations.

REGIONAL GROUPS

Currently, we have 45 active regional groups. Some of the groups have not been very active since the start of the pandemic, though they were authorized and encouraged to have teleconferences and virtual meetings. A growing number of groups are in a not in good standing status. Measures remain ongoing to promote stronger contact within regional groups in becoming more active and being more efficient. Support and services from national are continuous.

Notices and forms for the submission of regional group financial reports are mailed around June 15th of each year to regional group treasurers. The fiscal year covers the period July 1 through June 30. These reports are due at BVA National Headquarters by no later than September 30th each year. 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.

DIRECTOR DISTRICT ELECTIONS

Director District 5 Election:

Nominations for the office of Director District 5 were solicited by BVA National Headquarters memorandum dated March 19, 2020 for members in good standing residing in said district. The election is for a three-year term of office.

Member's, Darryl Goldsmith (FL), Elizabeth Holmes (GA) and Jesse Jones Jr. (GA) were nominees for the office of Director District 5.

A total of 1,289 ballots and biographical sketches of the candidates were mailed to Members and Associate Members residing in District 5. Ballots were opened and counted on July 16, 2020. A total of 205 ballots were received at Headquarters for a .16 percent return rate. Mr. Goldsmith was determined to be the winner of this election.

Director District 6 Election:

Nominations for the office of Director District 6 were solicited by BVA National Headquarters memorandum dated March 19, 2020 for members in good standing residing in said district. The election is for a three-year term of office.

Member's, Kevin Jackson (TX) and Guadalupe Guerra (TX) were nominees for the office of Director District 6.

A total of 1,310 ballots and biographical sketches of the candidates were mailed to Members and Associate Members residing in District 6. Ballots were opened and counted on July 16, 2020. A total of 182 ballots were received at Headquarters for a .14 percent return rate. Mr. Jackson was determined to be the winner of this election.

MEMBERSHIP

The Association's new membership system has undergone major revision, data analysis, and cleanup. Our team initially focused on removing duplicate membership records, as well as cross-referencing member data accuracy. We completed the comprehensive data migration from outdated systems and merged records accordingly. We worked with the Board of Directors to identify opportunities to streamline our data management processes (this project is ongoing) and are preparing to launch a new program in conjunction with the District Directors and Regional Group leadership to further refine our member data.

The year ahead will see our team actively engaged with association leadership and at-large members to ensure data accuracy. These efforts

will result in enhanced member communications, and overall organizational cost-savings. The volume of returned mail has become untenable, both nationally, and locally. We launched a pilot data analysis in District 6 with the Director and New Mexico Regional Group team, which we will deploy association-wide this year. We look forward to working alongside our membership and leadership to continually improve our operations and association.

A major area of concern identified during these analyses is the current composition / demographics of our membership. The table below illustrates how heavily skewed our membership is toward those veterans older than 70 years of age (73%).

Member Age	Total by Member	Total by Percentage
90+	1071	16.47%
80+	1500	23.07%
70+	2157	33.18%
60+	1133	17.43%
50+	456	7.01%
40+	119	1.83%
30+	54	0.83%
20+	11	0.17%
Total	6501	99.99%

*****We identified 259 member records missing a date of birth*****

The following table further illustrates the ongoing challenges as we compare our deceased member data to new member data. Please keep in mind that this also identifies the limited effectiveness of the decreased membership dues (\$25) incentive launched in 2018.

Member Age	2018	2019	2020	2021
90+	23	28	13	5
80+	40	77	29	6
70+	73	104	45	27
60+	47	83	44	13
50+	25	48	32	14
40+	7	20	4	5
30+	3	2	4	3
20+	1	3	1	1
Total	219	365	172	74
Deceased	672	***Null	667	243
Loss/Gain	-453	***N/A	-495	-169

*****We could not accurately cull this data due to the massive data migration and multiple variables potentially skewing the results*****

Our current data trends average 447 net member losses year over year as compared to member gains. Based on our current membership number of 6760, should this current rate of attrition continue, we would reach a net zero membership within 15 years. While multiple variables factor into analyses such as these, it is important to understand that we are continually (year over year) losing members disproportionate to member gains.

Finally, the following table provides a current membership count by District. These numbers consist of 4270 Associate Life Members (non-service connected) and 2295 Life Members (service connected).

District	Members
1	922
2	1078
3	913
4	1032
5	1222
6	1128
At-Large	465
Total	6760

*****Discrepancy between total Associate and Life Member numbers (6565) and total Members by District (6760) due to WWII and varying other data outliers. These will be identified and corrected as we continually clean our membership system.*****

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

In the past year, the Government Relations Team has continuously advocated on behalf of our blinded veterans. Utilizing the legislative priorities set forth in BVA's 2021 congressional testimony, the team scheduled 65 meetings with Congressional staff and members. The team focused on meeting with members of the House and Senate Veterans Affairs committees to relay BVA's support of the automobile grant legislation, share concerns regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) caregiver program and guide dog protections, and request stronger support for women veterans.

The Government Relations Team met with House and Senate Appropriation and Armed Services committee members to advocate for a \$10 million increase to the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Program's (CDMRP) Vision Research Program. The team also requested members' support for inclusion of four Vision Centers of Excellence (VCE) within the FY22 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) to improve ocular combat injury care and institutionalize these centers to prevent a loss of ocular trauma care capacity within the Department of Defense. Overall, meetings were very positive and Congressional staff were actively engaged with the BVA team. All contacts received follow-up emails with appropriate one-pagers to remind staff of BVA's requests.

Additionally, the Government Relations team was actively engaged with various Congressional offices advising on proposed legislation, offering press release statements, and providing subject-matter expertise when requested. The Government Relations team consulted on issues ranging from toxic exposure and veteran education to VA healthcare and service dog issues. The team has made connections with key offices, which will improve future advocacy efforts and elevate BVA's representation on Capitol Hill. The team spent 67 percent of staff time advocating for ocular research as compared to 33 percent spent on other initiatives.

Members of the Government Relations Team diligently represented our association at several relevant stakeholder and outside organization meetings. BVA tracked and attended all relevant Congressional committee and subcommittee meetings regarding upcoming legislation on veteran issues, VA reports, and oversight hearings. The team was actively engaged with The Military Coalition (TMC) supporting several organization initiatives, engaging on subcommittees, and advocating alongside other MSOs/VSOs to accomplish TMC goals. Government relations staff also worked with and maintained solid working relationships with Defense Health Agency (DHA), Department of Labor VETS, ITEM coalition, Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) working group, NAEVR/AEVR, and the VSO prosthetics group on a variety of advocacy initiatives.

BVA's team also utilized the platform One-Click politics, which allowed BVA members to engage with their Congressional representatives on issues that closely impact them. Several campaigns were created in the

past year reaching hundreds of senators and representatives from their own constituents. One-Click engagements have improved over the past year and the Government Relations Team plans to run more campaigns in the near future.

VETERANS SERVICE

The Veterans Service Program (VSP) provides representation (at no charge) to blind and visually impaired veterans for VA claims and appeals. According to the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), the total amount of monetary benefits for Compensation and Pension claims for veterans represented under BVA Power of Attorney from July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021 was \$51 Million. This is the total value of ongoing monthly benefits and not the total value of new claims won. Consolidation of all claim submissions via VetPro and improved custom reports from VA will enable more granular data reporting in future reports.

On average, there are anywhere from 100 to 175 active claims in VBMS at the VBA. The most common errors found by VSP staff are claims for Special Monthly Compensation (SMC) and eligibility adjudications for Specially Adaptive Housing (SAH) grants.

VSP staff have been crucial in helping blinded veterans with obtaining ancillary benefit claims for auto grants, SAH grants, and VA clothing allowance claims. Whenever a new rating decision is issued, VA policy requires claim processors to call veterans who are identified as blind or visually impaired in VBMS, but this policy has largely been ignored. VSP staff are holding VA accountable and have been successful in obtaining policy improvements and operational changes at VA Regional Offices to improve policy compliance.

In the past 12 months, the VSP reduced its Informal Hearing Presentations (legal briefs) backlog for legacy appeals at the Board of Veterans Appeals by 87% (30 appeals to 4). From July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021 there were 20 legacy appeals adjudicated by the Board of Veterans Appeals. The outcome of these legacy decisions: Grants 30%, Denials 0%, Remands 60%, Other 10%. We have a 90% win-ratio (Grants + Remands) for the current period. The data for AMA appeals is not available at this time, but will be included in future reports.

From July 1, 2020, to June 30, 2021 VSP staff recorded over 2,385 interactions with veterans, including over 1,389 phone calls, 500 emails, and 51 in-person meetings. The actual number of interactions are much higher as there was a learning curve with staff using the new VetPro software, and not all interactions were documented. The documenting of veteran interactions is improving.

BVA currently has 143 accredited VSO Representatives, of which most are cross-accredited service officers employed by state agencies. BVA is reducing the number of cross-accredited VSO representatives. It is anticipated the headcount of accredited VSO representatives will drop from 143 to 30-40 as the list is pared down to mostly primary accreditations.

BVA’s Ambassador Training Program has been significantly upgraded and now includes a robust set of 25 topics, which will be presented by subject matter experts. For example, training on VIST/BROS, VICTORs/VISORs, and Blind Rehabilitation Centers will be presented by VA BRS staff. VA Ophthalmology and Optometry Consultants will present eye conditions.

MODULE	PRESENTATION
1	BVA History
2	BVA Organization & Governance
3	BVA Membership
4	Public Relations/BVA Bulletin
5	Government Relations
6	Veterans Service Program (VSP)
7	Care Review Partnership
8	BVA Operation Peer Support (OPS)
9	Guide Dogs/Service Dogs 101
10	BVA Scholarship Program
11	VBA Benefits
12	VHA Benefits
13	VHA Community Care Program
14	VHA Caregiver Program
15	SAH/HISA/VR&E IL Grants
16	NCA & Survivor Benefits
17	Appeals (VBA, VHA,CG, Board, Court)

18	Eye Conditions
19	VIST/BROS Programs
20	VICTORS/VISOR Programs
21	BRC Program
22	VA Voluntary Service Program
23	Ambassador Ethics & Responsibilities*
24	Effective Advocacy
25	Training Wrap-Up

The launch of the new Ambassador training will be August/September 2021 after the BVA National Convention.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The national headquarters staff continued rising to the challenges faced throughout the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic. Building upon the efforts of the preceding year, our national team deployed technological solutions allowing for enhanced stakeholder engagement and improved member service delivery. While many in our sector struggled to maintain operational relevance, BVA thrived under adversity, acquiring and deploying state of the art solutions. These assets enabled our team to further refine operational budgets, strategically align professional staff and external contractors, and fully actualize modern efficiency standards throughout the organization.

BVA transitioned its technology acquisitions from desktop to laptop computer systems, while simultaneously deploying a new Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) telephone system. These technologies afforded the opportunity to maintain quality and consistent operations from remote locations. Realizing the myriad challenges faced by staff throughout the pandemic, we also used this time to fully restructure personnel policies and benefit plans. Collectively, these efforts resulted in improved staff morale, increased workflow, enhanced service delivery, and decreased operational expense.

Our development and membership teams, assisted by external subject matter experts and available HQ staff, continued addressing the challenges of the prior data migration projects. As stated in previous reports, this project consisted of hundreds of thousands of member and donor record migrations from multiple antiquated and failing databases to a single state of the art Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system.

The team is close to completing these massive migrations, while simultaneously refining and customizing the system for enhanced data accuracy and performance. We look forward to finally being equipped with the tools necessary for improved member engagement, donor and corporate stewardship, and comprehensive organizational reporting.

The Veterans Service Program (VSP) team completed their data migration projects, ensuring accountability and control of our entire claims inventory. The team has continued deployment of the new VetPro claims management system. This system has equipped our accredited claims representatives with the tools necessary to fully process and manage all claims activities remotely and electronically. BVA recently executed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with a nationally recognized leading VA disability law firm, allowing our claims representatives to maintain innovative training, and ensure our claimants receive competent and qualified representation before the Board of Veterans appeals and Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims should they so desire. The VSP team has also developed the new BVA Ambassador Training Program, in conjunction with the Department of Veterans Affairs and other external stakeholders. This program aligns with BVA's strategic plan, affording much-needed local "boots on the ground" organizational representatives throughout the country.

The ongoing global pandemic has continued to adversely affect our donor engagement. The organization has historically relied upon direct mail donor solicitation, so we conducted a thorough analysis of that program throughout the preceding year. While we realized the donor base would be experiencing challenges due to declining business and decreasing household revenue, we opted to test our new donor data via acquisition and various other sampling strategies. We are now confident in our ability to forecast direct mail campaigns and projected return on investment, allowing our development team to explore additional funding strategies for the future. While we still maintain an operational deficit on our financials, we were able to invest over \$1M into our investment funds and significantly decrease our projected deficit during an otherwise difficult financial time. We also avoided participating in any government funded Paycheck Protection Programs (PPP), or other loan programs, throughout the pandemic, again demonstrating strong fiscal stewardship.

While the preceding serves to highlight the accomplishments and positive momentum of our national headquarters staff, we did inevitably succumb to the challenges associated with modernization, efficiency modeling, and diminishing revenue. We bid farewell to Ms. Yvonne Preston, Ms. Kylie Fitzgerald, Ms. Loreal Hamilton, Ms. Lauren Bowles, and Mr.

Charles Reynolds. We also saw our SmithBucklin CPA Mr. Sunny Patel move on to pursue new opportunities. We wish them success and happiness in their future endeavors. We also look forward to a resumption of normalcy in the months ahead, returning to face-to-face events, and much-needed opportunities to connect with one another throughout our communities.

DEVELOPMENT

Data migration continued to be a major task for our team. Prior to designing and implementing the use of unique IDs within our Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, the data files were provided by our donation-processing center without any means to efficiently import the data. There were no unique IDs with which to match donation to donor, as well as months of File Transfer Protocol (FTP) files that needed to be manually matched and coded with a unique ID for each donation.

Our FTP files ranged in size from 120 to 675 records per file. Transferring, coding, and uploading these files has been the most time-consuming process for our team, but it is absolutely integral for us to begin properly stewarding donors in the future, as well as providing an accurate representation of our donors. All of these processes coincide with our new efficiency models and donor engagement requirements.

Donor acknowledgments are a vital aspect of donor stewardship. We have successfully implemented processes allowing for timely donor acknowledgment, tailoring to specified donor characteristics. Handwritten acknowledgements are produced internally from the Executive Director for donors giving \$500 and above, while our donation-processing center produces automated acknowledgements for all other mail-based donations. We have successfully implemented increased donor engagement programs via online mediums such as BVAs website, social media platforms, and additional third-party platforms. We are processing those acknowledgments in-house on a monthly basis while processing recurring donor acknowledgments annually.

In the year ahead we will continue scrubbing the CRM system to ensure uniform data quality, as well as begin digitizing BVAs bequest archives, transferring all paper-based files into the CRM system, thus allowing for accurate accounting, and tracking of future revenue. Additionally, we will perform a comprehensive analysis of all donor data to determine which files are under-performing, allowing for a more streamlined approach toward donor development, direct-mail return on investment, and digital marketing strategies.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

BVA Bulletin

At the heart of BVA's communications and public relations efforts for all 76 years of its history is the BVA Bulletin. The now quarterly publication, an integral part of BVA's work and service to its members, utilizes a name identical to the one used at its inception in 1946. In several cases, including the "Legislative Update" and the "President's Message," the same major section references are also used even after three-quarters of a century. Over the years, the number of Bulletin issues published during a given year has varied. For a short time early in its history it was a monthly publication but, in most cases, it has functioned as a bi-monthly piece. From the autumn season of 2003 until the same time of year in 2015 the Bulletin was produced quarterly but returned to bi-monthly circulation beginning with the September-October issue of that year. The BVA Board of Directors voted for a return to a quarterly 32- or 36-page publication average in the summer of 2020. There was no July-August 2020 issue of the Bulletin, and the issues once again became known by the seasons of the year beginning with the Summer 2020 issue that covered the months of July, August, and September. They will continue as such for the foreseeable future.

The Public Relations Team seeks a more thematic approach for the Bulletin than it has in in the past. In other words, the publication must better align with BVA's other public relations activities, especially as they relate to fundraising through direct mail, email blasts on holidays and special occasions, and messages appearing on bva.org.

The artistic layout and design of the Bulletin are carried out by Karen Smith, an independent contractor incorporated as Karen Smith Design. Printing and mailing services are performed by Vomela, one of the largest printing conglomerates in North America with diverse capabilities. BVA enlisted the services of Master Print just as the latter was being sold to Vomela. With a 36-page issue the cost of printing and preparation for mailing some 5,500 Bulletins is at present approximately \$4,200 while the cost of design is \$1,000. The cost of producing an audio version that is uploaded to the BVA website and duplicated onto 125 compact disks is approximately \$1,200.

The Bulletin continues to be produced in five formats: 1) a paper copy print version that also contains QR codes known as Voiceye, which is available via the Apple Store or Google Play, 2) an audio- described version

uploaded to bva.org, 3) an audio-described version on compact disk that is mailed, 4) an email version sent as a Word document, and 5) an email version sent as a PDF document. The PDF is also utilized for purposes of uploading to the BVA website. It is an exact replica of the hard copy with all graphics, photos, and colors included. The Word version is much like the audio version's script, complete with photo descriptions and other relevant narration to guide the reader. The only format not now available, which was available in the four years ago, is an HTML version that was featured on the BVA website. The Public Relations Team is studying the possibility of restoring this version since it allows Internet users and Bulletin readers to conduct a Google or Yahoo search to locate both past and present Bulletin content using key words. Such searches are currently not possible in the issue online. It is necessary to access the content in a PDF file, which is accessible on the website but is not web-based and cannot currently be read by a screen reader such as JAWS.

More Bulletin readers than ever before now depend on one of two email versions of the publication, or they access it online. The Public Relations Team also continues to professionally record each Bulletin through a narrator, Vietnam veteran John O'Leary of Bethesda, Maryland. The PR Team produces the compact disks for BVA members who have difficulty accessing the recordings online. The \$1,200 cost of this production mentioned above includes narration, editing, uploading the edited content to the website, and duplication of the CDs.

BVA Social Media Performance

Social media postings and their subsequent responses, comments, and reactions have increased during the past two years and especially during FY21. Visibility and exposure on social media have increased as a result although significant challenges remain. At the beginning of FY21 BVA terminated its relationship with JoshMeah, the marketing enterprise that had taken on BVA's social media scheduling and messaging the previous 18 months. With considerable input and direction from the Executive Director, the Public Relations Team has again resumed full responsibility for social media with Kylie Fitzgerald serving as the go-to team member for social media posting, editing, and responses until she left BVA in April 2021. A new Instagram account was also created. Facebook, the most interactive BVA account, remains active, as do the Twitter and LinkedIn accounts. A YouTube account continues to exist to maintain the availability of audio-visual recordings, productions, and presentations.

Because of Facebook’s popularity with the BVA audience, it remains the primary focus of social media efforts.

BVA aims to be highly interactive, engaging, and organization-focused with its social media activity. Efforts will now increase even further in that regard as the Public Relations Team strives for increases in the cross-tagging of relevant individuals and companies along with the use of relevant hashtags.

A slight uptick has occurred during FY21 in the number of Facebook likes and followers. The latter, for example, increased from 6,100 to 6,297. The number of Twitter followers is at 4,666. LinkedIn grew from 488 followers at the end of FY20 to 549 at the end of FY21.

Although social media participation and engagement is believed to be far more popular among Millennials and those of younger generations, BVA reaches and engages individuals 65 and older more than any other age group. Approximately 16 percent of the women who received BVA Facebook content on their screens and 13 percent of the men were 65 and older. The percentages for those actually commenting about BVA on Facebook were 26 percent for the women over 65 and 15 percent for the men over 65, again the highest for any other age group. The challenge ahead for the Public Relations Team is offering content that will capture the interest and engage those in younger age categories.

BVA Website

Central to the effort to re-design and make major improvements to the BVA website was the selection of Cheryl Gajadhar as the Information Technology Specialist/Webmaster in the Spring of 2020 and the Executive Director’s commitment to creating improved dropdown menus, facilitating better navigation, adding new sections and pages, and offering a new design and mindset about what the site should contain and how the content should be presented. Until Cheryl suddenly and very unexpectedly became ill and passed away last December, progress and strides were made expeditiously, at times overnight. A similar pace has now been set during the pandemic with Jordan Chesley as Cheryl’s replacement. Jordan has extensive knowledge and an instinct for graphic design and programming. He also has a keen awareness of accessibility issues. Changes and updates are quickly accomplished as pages are simultaneously constructed, including pages for each of BVA’s active regional groups and an interactive site for the upcoming convention and registration to participate. The path to making the website a viable tool for

the BVA membership, corporate supporters, and the general public is perhaps clearer than ever before. For the moment, the website is in capable hands and making important strides.

Public Relations Team Personnel

At the end of FY20, the Public Relations Team consisted of Stuart Nelson and Kylie Fitzgerald. Kylie's spouse, a member of the U.S. Army, was transferred to Germany May 8 after several months of training in Georgia. Kylie worked remotely from Georgia and Alabama for five months from October until March. Her last day at BVA was March 11.

BVA Monthly Newsletter

BVA's Department of Development initiated a monthly electronic newsletter in approximately 2012. The original intent of the newsletter was generating revenue and its tone was to follow, at least somewhat, that of Family Forum, a hard-copy newsletter sent to a similar but older BVA audience. The audience for the electronic newsletter consisted of higher-end donors for whom BVA was able to successfully obtain email addresses.

Over time, the intent and focus of the newsletter gradually changed, as did the audience. When some BVA members began expressing interest in the newsletter, they were added to the audience and soon there were dozens of members in the newsletter database. Fresh content in the newsletter became more the exception than the rule and, more often than not, articles from the Bulletin were simply adapted for the newsletter either before publication in an issue of the Bulletin or after. It also contained messages from the Executive Director and National President just as the Bulletin did and in some sense became another version of the Bulletin.

In consideration of the aforementioned circumstances and, at the behest of the Executive Director, the monthly e-newsletter has been suspended for the time being. However, special fundraising appeal newsletters are still being distributed on special occasions and for special purposes utilizing Mailchimp, the same all-in-one integrated marketing platform that was being used for the e-newsletters.

Membership Communications and News Releases/Announcements

The Public Relations Team in early March 2020 compiled an email distribution list consisting of the National Board of Directors, regional group presidents, and other active members of BVA who are active in their regional groups and engage regularly with national headquarters—and who would be willing to share the information with their fellow blinded veterans, most often within the same regional group.

Largely in response to the global pandemic and resulting developments within the blinded veteran community, the recipient data has been subsequently used for additional advisories, events of general interest, and news from the Department of Veterans Affairs on COVID-19 and a host of other topics. Of particular note is the use of this medium for advising the membership of the closing, or the impending closing, of the Blind Rehabilitation Centers and the directive from the National Board of Directors that the national conventions in 2020 and 2021 would consist of virtual meetings. Not only has the use of this list been vastly expanded in FY21 but the list itself is now 3,100 instead of approximately 100. Hence, the reference now is expressed “email blast” rather than simple messaging. This is because the entire membership for which email addresses are available is now being included in other communications that were previously limited to regional group presidents.

In many cases, email blasts have also formed the basis for inclusion on the website blog with links to significant information and on BVA’s social media channels. The potential for marketing and revenue generation using this communication and public relations tool is far-reaching. Despite a few successes to this point, this effort is still largely in its infancy with several important steps ahead in the pursuit of far greater stakeholder (members, donors, vendors, Department of Veterans Affairs) engagement with BVA.

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 Gruber program is in its 38th year, and the Miller program is in its 9th year.

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.

BVA EQUIPMENT

We purchased seven laptops and docking stations, other peripheral devices for office staff, and a new phone system as a means of adopting to new technologies.

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

From an investment and reserves standpoint, BVA remains in a stable financial position for FY22. The investment balance at Morgan Stanley for BVA sits at \$8.92M. BVA is projecting an operating deficit of \$449K. This is an improvement of \$41K in comparison to FY21’s forecasted operating deficit of \$491K. BVA continues to work year after year to cut its operating losses.

Operating Revenue for FY22 is budgeted to be \$1.18M. The FY22 amount is lower than the forecasted FY21 amount due to decreases in Planned Giving and Major Donor revenue. The result is a decrease of \$221K in revenue collections compared to the FY21 forecast. BVA’s goal for FY22 is to increase fundraising via Direct Mail. The staff will continue to utilize outside resources to begin working with corporations and individual donors to help increase development revenue.

Total Operating Expenses budgeted at \$1.63M are \$263K less than the FY21 forecast due to the elimination of multiple staff positions. Staff salary cuts across various programs account for a savings of \$107K. With the staff salary cuts, BVA has also managed to cut outside vendor costs with Public Relations and Development to help bring back the investment for these programs internally.

The annual BVA audited financial statement for FY21 will be appended to the hard-copy edition of this report as Appendix B.

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 acted prudently and responsibly in their decision-making and oversight. For that reason, BVA has remained in a stable financial position, notwithstanding continuous losses over the years. Your National Board of Directors deeply appreciates the support of the membership along with the national headquarters staff and looks forward to serving you during the coming year.

For the National Board of Directors,

**Dr. Thomas Zampieri
National President and
Chairman of the Board**

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APPENDICES:

A - Membership Statistics

B - Audited Financial Statement for FY21 (July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021)

C - Composition of six Director Districts