

The Bulletin

Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans



Winter 2022

MISSION POSSIBLE IN STEAMBOAT SPRINGS



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Cover Photos:

Joe Bogart, Gem State Regional Group, puts a spotlight on Team BVA's recent adaptive skiing and snowboarding experience in the Colorado Rockies. Pictured in addition to the group photo is Teresa Galgano, Florida Regional Group, with ski instructor and guide Laura Sallah. Photo courtesy of Steamboat Adaptive Recreational Sports.

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EDITORIAL STAFF

Editor: STUART NELSON
Associate Editor: KYLIE FITZGERALD
Staff Writers: DONALD OVERTON,
BRIGITTE JONES
Design, Pre-Press, and Printing:
KAREN SMITH DESIGN,
THE VOMELA COMPANIES

PO BOX 90770
WASHINGTON, DC 20090
TELEPHONE: 800-669-7079
202-371-8880
FAX: 202-371-8258
WEBSITE: <https://BVA.org>
E-MAIL: bva@bva.org

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President's Page



To Vote or Not to Vote, That is the Question by Joseph D. McNeil, Sr.

This country's history and current events are rooted in large part in how we as a people are represented.

We fought a war based on "taxation without representation" in the American colonies. We also drafted a constitution based on the ideals of representative government and have approved multiple amendments to it over the years on that same basis.

The nation still stands 246 years later.

As a people, we express our pleasure or displeasure with our elected officials through our vote. The right to vote provides us with the strongest means for expressing our opinion. Although no one can take that right from us, we can nullify it ourselves when we do the disservice of not voting.

You may now be asking yourselves: What is Joe's point here?

Well, my friends, my point is this: When we signed up on Uncle Sam's dotted line, we took an oath of office and part of that oath was duty, honor, and country. Part of what we did, additionally, gave individuals the rights to not vote. However, if you don't vote, you cannot complain with sincerity about anything because you have foregone a previous opportunity to change an outcome.

As members of a congressionally chartered national organization, we have earned the right to speak our minds through the voting process. In a few months, we will be holding elections for District Directors. These

directors will be representing you on the national board.

Soon you will be receiving candidate biography information on members who want to represent you at the national level. Please review and select wisely, as the young grasshopper meme goes. Every vote will count. As soon as you receive your ballot, please fill it out and immediately return it, or use the technology we have at our disposal to accomplish this. We may be trying something new to expedite the voting process.

Historically, BVA National Headquarters has mailed out thousands of ballots and received back only hundreds of completed ones. This all comes with a rather heavy price tag attached, not just from the time and money to conduct the elections but in some cases from a result that does not reflect the will of the BVA members as a whole but only that of those who took the time to vote.

We need to do better in our participation in the BVA democratic process and I know we can. Please vote and return your ballots in a timely manner.

Ask yourself the question: Am I going to vote or not? And, if not, then WHY NOT?

This is a member-driven organization and, without your vote, how is the Board supposed to know what you want?

District Directors are the voice of regional groups on the Board. You speak through them first and they communicate back to you on behalf of the Board.

If you're not being informed or making your voice heard, it's time to speak up. Your voice is your vote!



Legislative Update

by James R. Vale

The top three legislative priorities of BVA's Government Relations Team are the renewable automobile grant, caregiver benefits

for blinded veterans, and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) 508 accessibility and compliance.

The VA Auto Grant Program currently aids eligible service-connected legally blind veterans with a one-time \$22,355 (FY 22) grant toward the purchase of a vehicle. Not every blinded veteran has access to public transit or VA transportation. The use of ride services such as Uber may be convenient but can also be expensive, especially if used on a daily basis.

Employment and VA healthcare will become more accessible to blinded veterans, especially to those who reside in rural areas. Although they themselves cannot drive, these blinded veterans likely have a spouse or other family member who could provide transportation if they had their own vehicle.

Vehicles tend to wear out after about ten years, sometimes even earlier. Although VA will fund vehicle adaptations every two years, it is important to note that the VA Auto Grant is currently a one-time occurrence.

The auto grant has broad support of the Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs). In the Senate, S. 444, the Advancing Uniform Transportation Opportunities (AUTO) for Veterans Act, currently has ten co-sponsors and was referred to the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee. The corresponding bill in the House is H.R. 1361 with 54 co-

sponsors. It was referred to the House VA Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity.

There is currently no official Congressional Budget Office (CBO) score for the auto grant, but the cost is expected to be close to \$200 million per year (about \$2 billion over ten years). VA currently awards about 2,000 auto grants annually, which amounts to \$44.7 million. To put these financial figures in perspective, VA's FY 22 budget request is \$269.9 billion. The challenge to passing this legislation is finding extra revenue or offsets to satisfy congressional PAYGO (pay-as-you-go) rules. To look up what a bill costs, visit the CBO website at <https://www.cbo.gov/cost-estimates>.

Both the House and Senate bills need more co-sponsors. BVA members can help by contacting their members of Congress and informing them of the two bills and their importance. If you have benefited from previously using the VA Auto Grant and now need to replace your vehicle due to its age, BVA would like to hear from you. Please contact the Veterans Service Program (VSP) through <https://bva.org/programs/veteran-service/> or email vsp@bva.org.

The VA Caregiver Program, now known specifically as the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC), was created by the Caregivers and Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 for eligible post-9/11 veterans. Eligibility was later expanded by Section 161 of the VA MISSION Act of 2018 to include those who served on or prior to May 7, 1975. A further expansion scheduled for October 1, 2022 will include eligible veterans from all eras.

Unfortunately, VA's latest figures show a staggering nationwide 80 percent denial rate.

Blinded veterans face an ambiguous standard based on "...the need for supervision, protection, or instruction in order for the individual to maintain personal safety on a daily basis, or the inability to perform Activities of Daily Living (ADLs)." Depending on how broadly or narrowly these standards are interpreted, there is substantial gray area. The widely varying functional ability of blinded veterans with the same clinical diagnosis and severity of blindness, and subjectivity in the evaluation of their disabilities, further complicates the adjudication of PCAFC applications for our population.

BVA continues to raise these issues with partner VSOs, VA leadership, and congressional offices.

VA announced in the fall of 2021 that it will be mailing notices, in batches, to 450,000 veterans and caregivers regarding their new appeal options under the Appeals Modernization Act (AMA). The mailing includes Form 10-305, "Your Rights to Seek Further Review of PCAFC Decisions." Some veterans may have received this form with their 2022 Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) notice letter. No, you can't appeal your COLA, but you may have new options to appeal if you disagree with a PCAFC decision. Blinded veterans who disagree with their PCAFC decision are encouraged to contact VSP for more information on their appeal options.

BVA and other VSOs have noticed VA denials of veterans' Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for copies of their PCAFC claims file, which is part of their VA medical record. How can the veteran and their advocate construct an effective appeal

without that file? Blinded veterans have a right to a complete copy of the file that was used in their PCAFC claim. Those whose FOIA requests for copies of their PCAFC file were denied are urged to contact VSP on how to appeal these denials.

According to the "Report on the Accessibility of Websites of the Department of Veterans Affairs to Individuals with Disabilities," which was mandated by BVA-sponsored legislation via the VA Website Accessibility Act of 2019 (Public Law 116-213), only 7.7 percent of all 812 VA websites are fully 508 compliant, thereby creating a significant barrier for blind and visually impaired veterans and VA employees who have been disenfranchised by not being able to access these websites.

This accessibility barrier to the blind and visually impaired at VA is illegal and needs to come down. BVA continues its advocacy and pressure on VA regarding this important issue of 508 accessibility. VA's new Electronic Health Record (EHR) must also be fully 508 compliant. BVA is working with VA and congressional oversight to find effective remediation to ensure that VA websites and facilities, including self-service KIOSKs at VA Medical Centers and Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs), are accessible for the blind and visually impaired.

The Alexander Lofgren Veterans in Parks (VIP) Act (S. 2580 and the corresponding H.R. 4300) was added to the National Defense Authorization Act as Section 641, which gives veterans and Gold Star families free lifetime access to national parks and federal recreational lands. BVA thanks the bill's lead sponsors, Senator Krysten Sinema (D-AZ) in the Senate and Representative Marianne Miller-Meeks (R-IA-2) in the House, for their strong support.



Executive Director's Message

by Donald D. Overton, Jr.

Every year, the cold of winter melts away and spring brings a new beginning. New beginnings are never easy, but they are unique opportunities for a fresh start and all the wonderful possibilities new beginnings bring. I often wonder what it was like on March 28, 1945, when approximately 100 war-blinded soldiers from World War II founded the Blinded Veterans Association.

Although our Association has continually evolved over the 77 years following, it remains the only national VSO chartered by the United States Congress and exclusively dedicated to assisting America's blinded veterans and their families.

Our Congressional charter designates the organization as the official advocate and representative for all blinded veterans before the executive and legislative branches of government. Throughout our 77-year history, BVA has successfully carried out this important function while at the same time contributing meaningfully to making life better for thousands of individual blinded veterans across the country.

Since the organization's early beginning, BVA has worked tirelessly with the current cabinet-level VA to assure top-quality, comprehensive medical and rehabilitative services for blinded veterans. When the U.S. Army discontinued its blind rehabilitation services for the war blind at the end of World War II, BVA played an instrumental role in persuading VA to assume the responsibility

for their care and rehabilitation.

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

BVA also played an instrumental role in the establishment of the Visual Impairment Service Team (VIST) Program. Recognizing the isolating effects of blindness and the fact that blinded veterans were not accessing all the benefits and services for which they were eligible, the Association participated in a pilot outreach program in 1967. The purpose of the program was to identify eligible veterans and encourage them to take full advantage of VA benefits and services.

The key professional staff person on the VIST was the VIST Coordinator. In the early years, this position was only part-time. BVA

quickly recognized that a part-time VIST Coordinator was not adequate to coordinate all the services required by blinded veterans and urged VA to make these positions full-time. VA responded by establishing six full-time VIST Coordinator positions in 1978. BVA persisted in advocating for additional full-time positions and convinced Congress to provide the funding for such.

Dating back to 1947, BVA has continuously petitioned VA to provide outpatient blind rehabilitation services. The organization was successful in convincing Congress to earmark \$5 million in the 1995 Fiscal Year VA Appropriation for Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS). These dollars enabled BRS to establish 15 Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialists (BROS) positions.

Today that number has grown to more than 100 full-time positions. In addition, BVA has influenced legislation that provided the means by which a student preparing to become a BROS would be included in a VA scholarship assistance program if qualified.

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

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

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

As you can see, BVA takes advantage of every opportunity to present the special needs of America's blinded veterans before policymakers at all levels of government. Therefore, the greater the number of members of the Association, the louder the voice. Just as we welcomed our nonservice-connected brothers and sisters to BVA, we should welcome our low-vision brothers and sisters home as well. Thanks to your advocacy, low-vision veterans are receiving services from the same VA BRS staff as you and I. They are participating in VIST support groups, attending BRCs, and excited by the possibility of a new beginning, the opportunity to join the rich history behind the motto "Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans and their Families."

Following Lonnie's Inspirational Lead

by Stuart Nelson

When former Navy Petty Officer, now extreme sports athlete, Lonnie Bedwell, had his sight unexpectedly and suddenly taken from him in a 1997 hunting accident, hardly could he have envisioned at the time successfully raising three girls as a totally blind single dad.

That achievement, he says, will always be his greatest and most cherished one. No other extraordinary accomplishment or accolade, not even the recognition received on national television appearances or through a best-selling book about his jaw-dropping worldly feats, could possibly match his feelings about leadership, mentoring, and serving as a role model in his own home.

With the challenges of that pursuit and its inspiring results now in the background, however, Lonnie was still not about to drift into relative obscurity in his small hometown of Duggar, Indiana. He still had more to do, seeking additional ways to make his own life better and perhaps, in the process, help someone else. After all, Lonnie's life had always been about service in one way or another, whether it be helping his parents with chores as a young boy, helping out in his rural community, or signing up to serve in the U.S. Navy in 1985 in its nuclear submarine program.

In seeking those future opportunities, with his daughters now grown, he began planning and subsequently doing things he never dreamed were possible without sight. Then he shared those plans and experiences with others, among them some of his now closest friends.



Lonnie navigates challenging waters during recent kayaking event with Team River Runner.

The idea for Team BVA, an initiative of the Blinded Veterans Association that promotes purposeful activities and fellowship among blinded veterans, was inspired by the courage, determination, and passion of Lonnie Bedwell and a cadre of blinded veterans like him who had experienced vision loss but continually, and somewhat subconsciously, always put others before self.

Although the Team BVA motto, "One Vision, One Team, One Fight," has always been a personal mantra of Lonnie's, he now puts it into practice like never before in serving his fellow blinded veterans.

Lonnie did not receive any formal blind rehabilitation training for 13 years after losing his sight. In 2010, he finally reached out to VA after learning of its residential rehabilitation programs. The closest one was the Central Blind Rehabilitation Center (CBRC) in Hines, Illinois, just east of Chicago.

What he hoped for at the CBRC were a few high-tech gadgets and a couple of weeks



In early 2020, Lonnie Bedwell, left, with a pair of walking poles in his right hand, climbed Mount Kilimanjaro with a group he had never met before, some of whom had missing limbs, PTSD, or traumatic brain injuries. He experienced the African adventure with his remaining senses of hearing and smell as he heard sounds of monkey screams, smelled exotic flowers, and followed his guides' descriptions of vast, green foliage.

of practical training that could help him in his daily life. One of the things he obtained instead was an invitation to be the first-ever blinded veteran trainee to go snow skiing while at Hines.

“They asked me to be a sort of guinea pig for that experiment and, although I was willing to serve in that role because I love to keep doing new things, I had no idea how significant it would be in my life,” he recounts.

Lonnie did indeed obtain a few helpful gadgets and gain some computer proficiencies at Hines, but he went back to Indiana with a great deal more.



Lonnie is a popular motivational speaker in venues across the country, both virtually and in-person as he recounts his adventures and encourages persons of all ages to live and serve others to their fullest potential.

“My strength and my joy now come from those who haven’t yet experienced what I have but who are yearning for either the same or something like it,” he explains. “When a person with a disability like blindness can see that light in the darkness, that their disability does not have to define their lives or them as people—that’s what continues to inspire me to help create these opportunities for others.”

Lonnie coordinates kayaking, skiing, and climbing trips for Team BVA as he simultaneously plans his own climbs of Mt. Denali this upcoming November and Mt. Everest in mid-2023. His fellow veterans have remained his main concern during the challenging COVID-19 era that has so greatly restricted the activities that he has become so accustomed to leading.

Lonnie remains hopeful that the planned activities for Team BVA now on his calendar will stay there without further postponements or cancellations. He is driven to provide that inspirational leadership, showing others what



Lonnie prepares to embark on one of his many kayaking experiences throughout the past nine years.

they can do even when those endeavors can still be challenging to him.

“I push myself outside of my own comfort zone with a purpose, and that purpose is to show it can be done,” he says. “So many have sacrificed for me that I feel driven to give back and pay it all forward, and to give it my all knowing that others deserve my best effort.”

Did You Know?

- The Blinded Veterans Association has been sustained by generous Americans for an astounding 77 years. In 1944, Ms. Theodate Pope, a personal friend of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, donated the boys’ school facility that became both a Department of Defense hospital and training center for veterans who had lost their sight in World War II combat—and, of course, BVA’s birthplace as well. Thousands upon thousands of donations miraculously followed Pope’s donation. In honor of this milestone, BVA issues a call to action to its members and stakeholders for donations of a different kind. The blood supply in the United States is at a critical 10-year low and, as a result of the pandemic and other factors, the majority of the country’s blood centers are reporting dangerous declines in their blood collections. Please join BVA in assisting the American Red Cross in its efforts to replenish the nation’s blood supply by visiting <https://sleevesup.redcrossblood.org/campaign/blinded-veterans-association-sleevesup/>.

STARS and Stripes Takes to the Slopes

by Major Joe Bogart, U.S. Army (Retired)

As the New Year arrived, the air was cold, the wind was crisp, and the 2022 Winter Olympic Games were just around the corner. It was a great time to hit the slopes for some great skiing and snowboarding in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Ten blinded veterans and three spouses did just that from January 23-27, thanks to the Steamboat Adaptive Recreational Sports' STARS and Stripes program and our very own BVA.

The mission of Steamboat Adaptive Recreational Sports, now more commonly known as STARS, is to empower and enrich lives through adaptive recreational activities. It was formed in 2007 by a group of parents, ski instructors, and management from Steamboat Ski Corporation to help provide improved winter recreational opportunities for persons with disabilities. In 2010, STARS was contracted by Steamboat Ski Corporation to be the exclusive operator of all winter adaptive lessons and programs for the Steamboat Ski area. Since then, STARS has grown to offer year-round programming on and off the mountain. (Source: <https://steamboatstars.com/about-us/#history>)

Several of the ten blinded veteran participants were currently serving in leadership positions in their respective regional groups. The remaining three participants were spouses, two of whom were disabled veterans and the other a retired law enforcement officer. The skiing or snowboarding experience level varied from expert and former competitor to first-time beginners. STARS was able to easily accommodate all abilities.



First-time skier Teresa Galgano navigates turns during practice session at STARS. Photo courtesy of STARS.

Lieutenant Colonel Teresa Galgano, U.S. Army (Retired), of Fort Meyers, Florida, was one of the adventurous first timers. Teresa learned of the opportunity through the BVA Ambassador Training Program and immediately thought, “Hey, I want to get out there!”

She also said: “I never skied before and didn’t even know if I would like it; however, before I went home, I made reservations to go back in March!”

When asked about what it was like learning to ski blind when over 60 years old, she responded: “The guides are amazing people who listen to you and make sure you stay within your comfort and ability level. I felt very comfortable learning at my own speed

and, when I was tired, we rested. I came to a point where I trusted my guide to direct me down the hill. I am relatively new to being blind and, because of COVID-19, I haven't really been able to take any other blind training, so it was interesting to be able to trust my guide like that."

Former Air Force Sergeant Harvey Guary of Gwynn Oak, Maryland, said another BVA member called him several years ago and invited him to participate.

"I've probably been doing STARS now for 4-5 years. At first, it was really scary because I was trying to keep my balance and listen to instructions at the same time, plus getting rid of the fear of being on skis and going downhill as a beginner even though it's only a slight slope. But, after my first two or three days of skiing, my confidence was there and now it is working on skills like speed control, tight turns, and stopping on time."

William Mathis, former U.S. Army Specialist, of Colorado Springs, Colorado, has been snowboarding for three years. He also learned to ride after losing his eyesight. Will stated that his experience was a bit different.

"In the beginning, learning to ride blind was a struggle because I couldn't see or hear the instructors. Then I got a device for my helmet which allowed me to hear my instructors and that was a game changer because I could hear them as if they were right beside me. Now, I have more freedom with this device because I can be in the moment while riding."

Will said he learned of the opportunity through Team BVA, which allowed him to get out and connect with other veterans and instructors who could adapt the activities to his abilities.

He said further: "Prior to snowboarding, I was very sedentary and, since learning to ride,



Minus poles, adaptive sports enthusiast Harvey Guary makes final approach on Steamboat Ski Resort run. Photo courtesy of STARS.

I am physically active 6-7 days a week. This brought a wealth of benefits—better blood sugar levels, weight loss, and mental and emotional well-being."

Teresa also remarked about her increase in physical activity: "My normal physical activities involve walking my guide dog, Donald, 2-4 miles daily. Before this trip, I had recently come out of an illness that had me in relatively poor physical shape. This experience has inspired me to join a local fitness program."

Harvey remarked that he has been doing adaptive sports through VA for several years: "I have been actively participating in VA adaptive sports programs like the Summer and Winter Sports Clinics and now the Golden Age Games. I play goalball locally with the Maryland Raptors. When we finally get to meet in person, I will resume an adaptive Judo Program with the rank of Brown Belt."

Adaptive skiing is just one of many activities available to BVA members of all ages and abilities. If you want to get out and be part of some amazing adaptive

recreation opportunities, contact your BVA regional group leadership, District Director, or your local VA Medical Center VIST and Recreational Therapists to learn more. Let them know what activities you are interested in so they can help get you involved. In

addition, please make sure BVA National Headquarters and your regional group has your current contact information, including an email address, so that Team BVA can keep you up to date on future opportunities to get outdoors and stay active.

Anticipation Building for Long-Awaited DC Convention

by Brigitte Jones

Formal Official Notice

Pursuant to the provisions of Section 3b of Article IX (National Convention) of the BVA National Bylaws, all members of the Blinded Veterans Association in good standing are hereby notified that the **BVA 77th National Convention** will be held at the **Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill**, 400 New Jersey Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20001, **from Monday, August 22, through Friday, August 26, 2022.**

An online registration form is now live at <https://bva.org/national-convention/>. Periodic updates about the convention will be posted regularly to the same page. If required, an electronic or printed copy of the registration materials can be provided by contacting mbuonodagrossa@bva.org.

Preparations Underway for Gathering in Nation's Capital

After BVA's virtual educational sessions in 2020 and the four days of continuous educational and business meetings in 2021, the BVA National Board of Directors is pleased to announce an in-person convention

for 2022, complete with the traditional business meetings, social events, and exhibit hall.

“This year we are planning for a greater emphasis on the social events and opportunities to get out of the hotel and enjoy Washington, DC, rather than sitting in meetings,” said National Vice President and Convention Committee Chairman Danny Wallace. “More than anything else, we want this convention to be a happy reunion and for our members to have a good time with one another.”

In addition to a potpourri of options outside the hotel, the customary Tuesday evening National President's Reception, the Wednesday morning Opening Business Session, the Thursday afternoon Father Carroll Luncheon, the Friday morning Closing Business Session, and the Friday evening Awards Banquet will all return as they were prior to the pandemic.

A special invitation is being extended to all potential exhibitors and sponsors to attend the 77th National Convention.

Important Dates for Required Actions

The Administrative Director has announced the following schedule of actions that must be completed by both regional groups and individuals leading up to the convention.

A reminder will be mailed to regional group presidents and secretaries on **March 28** regarding the due date for submission of bylaw amendments for consideration at the convention. A mailing to all BVA members in good standing will also occur on **March 28** (150 days leading up to August 22). The mailing will call for nominations for District Director in a special election that will be held in newly formed Districts 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Two copies of the credentials form will also be mailed on **April 19** to all regional groups.

BVA members in good standing who wish to vote by proxy may still do so by writing or calling BVA National Headquarters no later than 45 days before the start of the 77th National Convention. That day falls on **Thursday, July 14**.

In compliance with Section 2c of Article IX, the proxy form must be completed and returned to BVA National Headquarters to the attention of the Administrative Director. To be considered valid, the envelope containing the form must be postmarked no later than 21 days before the opening date



Washington Union Station is a premier icon in our Nation's Capital for its beautiful architecture, upscale shops, and fine dining. The transportation hub is a ten-minute walk from the Hyatt Regency Hotel, site of the BVA 77th National Convention. During its heyday in the early 1940s, Union Station served up to 42,000 passengers daily.

of the convention. Therefore, the due date is **Tuesday, August 2**.

Both regional groups and individuals should refer to the following timeline in preparing for the convention. Items listed include actions required by the national headquarters, regional groups, and individuals. Questions can be addressed by calling 800-669-7079. All of the following indicate actions mandated by the BVA National Bylaws by the dates indicated.

March 28—National headquarters sends reminders to regional group presidents and secretaries that proposed bylaw amendments to be considered at the 77th National Convention must be postmarked no later than 90 days prior to the beginning of the convention. That date is May 25.

March 28 (no later than 150 days before convention)—Special mail call for nomination of Directors of Districts 1, 2, 3, and 4 to members in good standing.

April 19—Mail credentials forms, two copies each, to regional group presidents, vice presidents, secretaries, and treasurers.

May 16 (no earlier than 100 days before convention)—Earliest date to issue official notice of the 77th National Convention to prospective convention attendees. The 100-day mark is May 15, which is a Sunday. The due date has therefore been pushed forward one day to accommodate the weekend.

Mid-May—77th National Convention pre-registration information prepared at national headquarters and sent to those who have expressed an interest in attending.

May 25 (no earlier than 90 days before convention)—Earliest date to distribute ballots for the special elections in Districts 1, 2, 3, and 4.

May 25 (no later than 90 days before convention)—Envelopes containing proposed bylaw amendments must be directed to national headquarters and postmarked.

May 25—Earliest date to mail proposed bylaw amendments to members in good standing.

June 9 (no later than 75 days before convention)—Latest date to issue pre-registration official convention notice.

June 14 (no later than 70 days before convention)—Latest date for national headquarters to mail ballots for the special election of all District Directors.

June 15—National headquarters mails annual financial report forms (two copies) to treasurers of regional groups.

July 11 (no later than 45 days before convention)—Ballots for special election of District Directors due at national headquarters. The 45-day mark is July 9, which is a Saturday. The due date has been pushed forward two days to accommodate the weekend.

July 14—Regional group meeting notices to elect convention delegates must be mailed to group members. A copy of this notice must also be mailed to national headquarters at the same time.

July 14—Latest date to mail proposed bylaw amendments to members in good standing.

July 19 (35 days before convention)—National headquarters counts ballots for special election of District Directors.

August 2 (21 days before convention)—Completed delegate credentials forms and proxy forms must be postmarked no later than midnight.

Award Submission Reminder

Each year BVA recognizes at the national convention the individuals who have recently sacrificed and excelled extraordinarily. Awards include the Major General Melvin J. Maas Award for Professional Achievement, the Irving Diener Award, the David L. Schnair Award, and a Certificate of Appreciation. These awards were established to recognize the honor that such individuals have brought to the organization. They also recognize the effort and dedication that were required to achieve such excellence.

The Maas Award was initiated by the late Baynard Kendrick, a renowned mystery writer and author of **Lights Out**, the story of a World War II blinded veteran. Specifically, the award seeks to honor the person who has contributed to the positive image of the blind community through professional achievement. In honor of Maas, nominations should be individuals who have achieved success in their employment despite their vision loss and who have helped other blinded veterans find and develop their own independence.

Before his death, Maas was quoted in the **New York Times**: “A handicapped person who lives to his potential leads a more successful life than the so-called normal person who uses only 50 percent of his capabilities.”

The Irving Diener Award was initiated by a former member of the BVA National Advisory Committee who continuously supported BVA. As a sighted individual, Diener sought to empower those who were truly dedicated to the organization. The award seeks to honor those who have made an outstanding commitment and contribution to their regional group and the national organization rather than for their personal achievements in rehabilitation or employment. Diener saw that by recognizing one individual he was motivating BVA members to focus on helping veterans located close to them geographically.

World War II blinded veteran David L. Schnair was an early member of BVA and a member of the National Board of Directors for more than 40 years, including Director of

District 1. During those same years, he was a volunteer at the New York City VA Regional Office. Today, BVA continues to honor David’s volunteerism through the Volunteer Service Award. Recipients of this award should be exemplary volunteers locally and/or nationally. They should understand the VA system and serve as a spokesperson for the needs of all blinded veterans.

The Certificate of Appreciation is in place to acknowledge those who have positively influenced the blinded veteran community and the achievements of its members. To be eligible for this award, an individual may not be a BVA member. The award is limited to those in the field of blind rehabilitation who serve veterans with vision loss.

Nominations for each of the previously referenced awards are now being accepted. All nominations are due **Friday, April 29, 2022**. Further information, as well as nomination guidelines and criteria, can be found at <https://bva.org/programs/awards/>.

Honorees will be recognized at the Friday Awards Banquet, the culminating event of the convention week. The Awards Banquet also recognizes the regional groups who have earned the Gold, Silver, and Bronze Gavels for the past fiscal year.

The Certificate of Appreciation is awarded at the Thursday Father Carroll Luncheon.



In gold engraving on a polished black granite wall, the names of the 58,318 Americans who gave their lives in the Vietnam conflict are listed chronologically. A visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, will be an absolute must for many attendees of the BVA 77th National Convention.

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Around BVA

Never Too Late for Rigorous Personal Fitness

by George Hallman

Editor's Note: In early January, BVA National Headquarters distributed information about the VA Sports4Vets Throwdown. In response, we received a response from George, a longtime BVA member from West Columbia, South Carolina. George was uniquely qualified for this virtual event because of an intense physical routine that he has maintained for many years. Apart from the Throwdown, we asked him to share his personal story of staying in shape for an issue of *The Bulletin*. He agreed to do so on the condition that we clearly convey that BVA asked for the article, not vice versa. "I do not want anyone to assume that I was brazen enough to set myself up as a model for anyone," he told us.

After graduating from high school, I played one season of professional baseball in the Cincinnati Reds organization before enlisting in the U.S. Air Force. I went through training to become a radio operator and served in both Japan and Korea. Two months prior to my 20th birthday, I was injured in Korea and was left permanently and totally blind.

Following multiple surgical procedures, I attended the rehabilitation center at Hines VA Hospital, a center then under the direction of affable Russ Williams. At an earlier time, Russ Williams served as the first ever BVA Executive Director and was also a member of the Board of Directors after that. Dr. Ron Miller, another future Executive Director,



George Hallman braces for one of two weekly workouts on his treadmill.

was a patient with me at Hines. I have great respect for both outstanding leaders. Both were close personal friends.

Following completion of training at Hines, I married a wonderful nurse, attended undergraduate and graduate schools, earned a doctoral degree from the University of Georgia, taught psychology at the college and university levels for 38 years, and for ten more years served as a mentor in the Department of Athletics at the University of South Carolina.

I have been involved in physical fitness and athletic activities for most of my life. Now, at age 87, I have a customized five-day-per-



George Hallman lays to rest the belief that certain physical activities, weightlifting included, become impossible with age.

week fitness program that includes at least 75 sit ups each day. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, I do at least a thousand pushups, a full range of weightlifting that includes presses, curls of biceps and forearms, and pulls. Additionally, I do lots of hand-grip exercises. Also on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I follow weightlifting with at least 30 minutes on a treadmill. Tuesdays and Thursdays I spend from 45 to 60 minutes on a treadmill. On each of these five days I do several hundred half squats.

I am not recommending a similar program as a model for anyone. I am simply saying it is never too late, assuming one has no physical limitations, to engage in physical fitness activities.

The benefits of being physically fit cannot, in my opinion, ever be overstated. Besides a feeling of general well-being, being physically fit helps to maintain a high energy level and, again in my opinion, is essential for maximizing intellectual, physical, and emotional development and functioning.

If you do not regularly participate in a moderate to strenuous fitness program, and would like to do so, I suggest you undergo a thorough physical examination by a physician to rule out any health issues that might limit your participation in strenuous physical activities. If you have no limiting conditions, seek the service of a qualified trainer who can help you create a program designed to meet your needs. If you have been inactive for a prolonged time, getting started can be difficult. Stick with your program for at least six weeks and it is likely that the program will become a routine you will never regret. A fitness program, in my opinion, involves every phase of daily life, including consistent and regular brushing of teeth, proper diet and hydration, and sufficient rest.

My program is not a recommendation for anyone. Determine what your fitness goals are and design a program to meet them. If I can be of assistance to anyone, the **Bulletin** editors can tell you how to reach me.

National President Presents Priorities in Joint Hearing

Joe McNeil formed part of a nine-member panel of VSOs on March 2 as he summarized BVA's priorities for the second session of the 117th Congress in a joint hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs.

The setting was the Senate side of the U.S. Capitol with Chairman Jon Tester (D-MT) directing and moderating the proceedings.

The hearing was conducted as a hybrid meeting with both virtual and in-person participation. Joe made his presentation a virtual one from his home in Columbus, Georgia. A question-and-answer period followed the presentations.

The annual presentations provide the platform for the VSOs to highlight points of emphasis in their written testimonies submitted for the Congressional record. Highlighted in Joe's oral testimony were improved oversight of VA Section 508 accessibility compliance, effective implementation of caregiver benefit programs, and VA Auto Grant Legislation.

The written testimony also addressed adequate funding for VA Blind Rehabilitation Service, continued improvement of programs and services for women veterans, enactment of adequate protections for guide dogs on federal properties, and support for the budget request for Prosthetics and Sensory Aids.

To read the written document submitted to Congress shortly before the hearing, please visit <https://bva.org/government-relations/>.

BVA Mourns Passing of Ohio Stalwart Leader

Vietnam era Army veteran David T. May, a fierce advocate of blinded veterans and BVA in the Columbus, Ohio, area for more than three decades, passed away February 24.

"Dave was my mentor in BVA and DAV (Disabled American Veterans) as well," said Ed Loudon, whom Dave helped elect as the Ohio Regional Group President two years ago.

Dave was also known for working effectively with VA personnel, especially former longtime VIST Coordinator and Cleveland BRC Director Ellen Papadimoulis. The two formed a productive partnership for

BVA and VA at the Louis Stokes VA Medical Center until Ellen's retirement in early 2015.

Dave accrued more than 20,000 volunteer hours with BVA and DAV. His obituary said that he had a heart for all veterans and worked tirelessly to help in whatever area they needed. He attended many Winter Sports Clinics and TEE Tournaments, always on the lookout for opportunities to help. He was a past Department Commander of DAV. His recent assignment relating to veterans was as a Commissioner with the Stark County Veterans Service Commission.

Dave is survived by his wife of 53 years, Christina, two daughters, a granddaughter, and a brother-in-law.

NJRG Members Advocate for Improved Transportation

Led by president Bill Graves and vice president Mustafa Shabazz, members of the New Jersey Regional Group recently united successfully with other New Jersey veterans in expressing frustration with the complex web of disconnected transportation services within the state system when trying to reach VA appointments.

In a February 16 virtual hearing before the State Assembly Military and Veterans Affairs Committee, thanks in large part to Bill and Mustafa being unwilling to take no for an answer, several veterans recounted tales of late and missing rides, unreturned calls, and long waits that forced some to forgo medical treatment.

Although New Jersey has a state-level program that operates in partnership with each of New Jersey's 21 counties to help veterans reach VA Medical Centers, the program has faced funding cuts that have resulted in spotty services. The result in the end has forced veterans to miss critical medical procedures or

wait hours for a ride to or from a hospital.

The veterans who testified before the Assembly panel made several suggestions for improvement, among them an expansion of a paratransit system that serves residents with disabilities to more areas of the state. They also suggested that the state link its transportation services with those provided by counties and volunteers through a central system that would allow the currently unconnected systems to communicate with each other so that veterans could call just one number for a ride instead of going to multiple services that often do not respond anyway.

The efforts of the New Jersey Regional Group offer a model for how BVA members can become involved in local issues that affect them, informing local officials of problems and influencing public policy on a state and local level to improve the quality of life for blinded veterans and their families.

Columbus Chapter Restores Annual Holiday Dinner

Although the Georgia Regional Group's Columbus Chapter missed but one annual holiday dinner due to the pandemic, somehow it seemed like many more as chapter members gathered December 4 for a festive meal of turkey, ham, stuffing, and other traditional staples. The event occurred at the Kirkland Memorial Baptist Church in Columbus.

"It seemed like we missed more than one dinner because here we were presenting awards to our members for their work back in 2019 when 2022 was already upon us," said Elizabeth Holmes.

Chapter member Otis Smith received the 2019 Robert N. Willis Achievement Award and Elizabeth received the Dr. Norman Jones, Jr. Achievement Award, both of which represent exemplary service to the



Left to right, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, VIST Coordinator Dr. Debra Tazewell, Elizabeth Holmes, Otis Smith, and Georgia Regional Group President Raymond Thorn.

chapter. BVA Auxiliary National Treasurer Ben Holmes was presented with a Georgia Regional Group Service Award for his continuous exceptional service to the group members for more than five years as of late 2019.

A 50/50 drawing for raffled gifts, courtesy of the BVA Auxiliary and totaling \$122, sent Ben home pleased for a second reason as he drew the winning ticket.

"It was so great to get together after missing this event the year before," Elizabeth said. "Nothing can replace an in-person dinner party with veterans during the holiday season."

Wade Davis Appears before Texas Governor's Committee

Greater Houston Regional Group member and National Veterans Care Review Specialist Wade Davis joined representatives of Guide Dogs for the Blind, Canine Companions for Independence, the American Council of the Blind, and the National Federation of the Blind on January 27 in a presentation to the

Texas Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities.

The presentation was an effort to strengthen Texas state law protecting guide dogs and service dogs, and to penalize those using or selling certificates for fraudulent service dogs, which can endanger the safety of true service dogs and persons with disabilities who own them.

The group supports changes in Texas laws that will mirror a law in California that differentiates service dogs from emotional support dogs.

"The Texas group feels that such changes will be a huge step forward in protecting our true service dogs," said Wade. "We also hope that this movement will start in other states."

Wade recounted in his testimony experiences with his guide dog Mulligan's interaction with fraudulent service dogs while on their travels to evaluate BRCs for BVA.

Emotional support animals can provide support through companionship and can help ease anxiety, depression, and certain phobias. However, they are not service dogs and do not legally receive the same accommodations as service dogs.

BVA, BVAA Saddened by India Bazemore Passing

India Arthenia Bazemore, first selected in 2017 as the BVA Auxiliary National Chaplain at the 72nd National Convention in Jacksonville, Florida, passed away on December 17, 2021.

A resident of New Bern, North Carolina, India was also a Volunteer National Service Officer at the Durham VA Medical Center and remained active in supporting the blinded veterans of the North Carolina Regional Group even after the death of her husband, Dallas, in 2018.

Scholarship Deadline Fast Approaching

Applications for the higher education scholarships for the 2022-23 academic year, six under the Kathern F. Gruber program for \$2,000 each and one \$1,000 scholarship in the name of Thomas H. Miller, are due by **Friday, April 29**.

Dependent children, grandchildren, and spouses of blinded veterans, and those of active-duty blinded service members of the U.S. Armed Forces, are eligible for the scholarships. The veteran must be legally blind and the blindness may be either service connected or nonservice connected. Membership in BVA by the blinded veteran is not required.

The Miller program requires the same application process and qualifications as the Gruber awards except for an added emphasis on music and the fine arts. The Scholarship Committee will choose seven total recipients and two alternates.

Application materials for the scholarships and additional information may be obtained from <https://bva.org/programs/scholarships-awards/>, by request via email to bva@bva.org, or by calling 202-371-8880, ext. 330.

Due to time constraints related to processing the applications for the Scholarship Committee's review, applications arriving after the April 29 deadline will not be accepted.

NYRG BVA Member Salutes Women VIST, BROS

Warner Murray, author of poems, tributes, and short expressions of thanks published in many issues of **The Bulletin**, has asked to represent BVA members in expressing appreciation to the women of VA during this

Women's History Month of March. He has specific praise for his own VIST Coordinator and BROS as follows:

We, the New York Regional Group-Manhattan Support Group, congratulate our VIST Coordinator, Ms. Natasha Mlotok, during this Women's History Month. Her professional service rendered to blinded and visually impaired veterans is truly appreciated. Her learning sessions on Zoom, conference calls, and exchanges of information were all wonderful experiences. Through two years of COVID-19 lockdown,

her tenacity and resilience to support the morale of blinded veterans was superb.

The New York City BROS is truly a gem to the Blinded Veterans Support Group. Ms. Deborah Kraut has persevered through all the changes wrought by COVID-19. She maintained her home visits, her technology training, and her mobility training. She wore a mask and a full protective gown and gloves for the safety of all involved. We express appreciation to Ms. Kraut during this Women's History Month for her resilience in providing quality service to blinded veterans.



Auxiliary's View

by Patricia Hail

"We're sorry to inform you..." "You don't meet the requirements..." "You are too well off..." "You

already have..." Those are words many of you, as caregivers, have likely heard.

Then they tell us that "as a caregiver, you must first take care of yourself, so that you can better care for those who need you" – our veterans and family. They tell us to do all these things, including get some help, and then we get another denial letter. So, let's look at our options.

VA does have several programs that might be able to help if you know what to look for and where to look. But, first, let's consider some of the preliminaries that we need to be aware of before we choose a program to apply for.

Activities of Daily Living

(ADL): Before you take the first step toward getting any help from VA as a caregiver, sit down with your veteran and ask: "What would you have to hire someone else to do for you, or do without, if you were by yourself?" Have an honest discussion, then get an appointment with your veteran's Primary Care Team (PCT) to assess your veteran's needs for caregiver assistance. ADL includes, but are not limited to, bathing/showering, dressing, grooming, toileting, eating/feeding, meal preparation, medications, transfer (to/from bed, car, shower, chair, etc.), and grocery shopping. Which of these do you help with (or do) for your veteran? To what degree?



An assessment of needs that are part of ADL is necessary when examining the VA options for help. Remember also that usually you will be able to receive only one of these options, so investigate and choose wisely the benefit for which you want to apply and receive.

Aid and Attendance: This requires enrollment in the VA Healthcare System as well as a particular disability and/or priority group rating. It is applied for and awarded to the veteran based on need for assistance with ADL or housebound status. Several VA forms may apply here; it is recommended to seek the assistance of a Veteran Service Officer or BVA advocate for assistance with this process.

Home Health Care: This may be recommended to you by your PCT. If recommended, your PCT may tell you the number of hours you qualify for, then a home health care vendor will call and set up a schedule to visit and assist you. This may work for some people but not for those who live in a rural area.

Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC): This program is available to veterans who served on or before May 7, 1975, or on or after September 11, 2001; in October of this year, the program will be expanded to veterans of all eras. In addition to ADL, the veteran “must be 70 percent service-connected with a serious illness or injury.” This is one of the few benefits applied for with a VA form (10-10CG) that is awarded by the Veterans Health Administration rather than the Veterans Benefits Administration. It is awarded at one

of two levels based on the severity or need. There are regular evaluations, training, and reports. BVA is currently discussing how our caregivers of blinded veterans are seemingly being excluded from this program.

Veteran-Directed Care: This program is open to all enrolled veterans “if they are eligible for community care, meet the clinical criteria for the service, and if the program is available.” In addition to regular evaluations, this program is frequently contracted to a third party and may be subject to additional fees and oversight. The program was designed for veterans to live out their lives at home with as much normalcy as possible.

Although the VA caregiver website does not have all the answers, it can be a good resource at <https://www.caregivers.va.gov>. You may also call the caregiver support line at 855-260-3274; or call your closest VA Medical Center and ask for the Caregiver Support Program. Most of these programs at the medical centers offer general caregiver support groups, programs, and seminars to help caregivers learn about, understand, and obtain help from these local and national programs.

BVAA not only supports BVA and BVA regional groups, we support each other! Every year at the national convention, we have caregiver-oriented programs for both caregivers and blinded veterans. We have found that communication and support is more effective if everyone in the household is informed. Learn more about BVAA at www.nbvaa.org or email BVAA President Sandy Krasnodemski at ltldlx@sbcglobal.net.



Veterans Service Program Update

by James R. Vale

It is well known in the veteran community that veterans can receive compensation for their service-connected injuries, but did you

know that VA provides a \$101,754 grant for making a home more accessible and safer for veterans and service members with qualifying disabilities?

VA funds approximately 2,000 Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) grants annually, which total \$120 million. Since the SAH program's inception in 1948, more than 46,000 grants have been awarded, totaling approximately \$1.75 billion.

An SAH grant may be accessed up to six times until the total maximum available grant amount is fully exhausted, which is adjusted annually based on the Turner Construction Index. The SAH grant may also be used by eligible veterans who reside outside the United States.

What if your already specially adapted home is damaged or destroyed by a natural disaster? With limitations (after the homeowner's insurance claim), 38 U.S.C. Section 2109 authorizes the VA Secretary to provide additional SAH assistance to veterans whose homes have been destroyed or substantially damaged by a natural or other disaster, if a disaster declaration is posted on the FEMA website authorizing individual assistance.

The eligibility requirements for an SAH grant are complex and can be found in 38 U.S.C. Section 2101. To qualify for an SAH

grant due to blindness, the standard was previously "blindness in both eyes having only light perception," which is a very high standard. Under the old law, legal blindness didn't qualify for the SAH grant, but it would qualify now for the smaller Special Housing Adaptation (SHA) grant, which is \$20,387.

Two years ago, BVA successfully advocated for the passage of H.R. 3504 (Ryan Kules and Paul Benne Specially Adaptive Housing Improvement Act of 2019, now Public Law 116-154). The new law expanded SAH grant eligibility to less severely impaired blinded veterans. Blindness and visual impairment no longer qualify for the smaller \$20,387 SHA grant. Instead, these conditions now qualify for the much larger \$101,754 SAH grant. Blinded veterans who already received funding under SHA are still eligible for SAH.

VA has indicated that each draw from the SHA grant counts as one of the six draws from the SAH grant, but there is no dollar-for-dollar offset between these two grant programs. This means that an eligible blinded veteran who used the prior SHA grant can also access the full SAH grant, as long as there is at least one draw left.

To be eligible for the SAH grant under the new law, a blinded veteran must be at least legally blind and service connected for the blindness as defined by 38 U.S.C. Section 2101(a)(2)(B)(ii). According to VA, these criteria are Diagnostic Code (DC) specific and assigned in percentages based on the VA rating schedule in 38 CFR Section 4.79.

The seven qualifying blindness DCs are: 6061, anatomical loss of both eyes; 6062, no

more than light perception in both eyes; 6063, anatomical loss of one eye when rated 70 percent or greater; 6064, no more than light perception in one eye when rated 70 percent or greater; 6065, vision in one eye 5/200 (1.5/60) when rated 70 percent or greater; 6066, visual acuity in one eye of 10/200 (3/60) or better when rated 70 percent or greater; and 6080, visual field defects when rated 70 percent or greater.

What adaptations would a blinded veteran need to make for the family home to become safer and more accessible? Most blindness-related adaptations fall into these three categories: 1) improvement to lighting, such as new lighting fixtures; 2) reduction of glare, such as window tinting and awnings; and 3) improvements to safety, such as handrails, ramps, security and intercom systems, and smart home installations.

For more information on recommended adaptations for blindness, see VA M26-12 Manual (Appendix B). Please note that VA may approve the purchase of a backup power generator for veterans who live in areas highly prone to power outages and need power to operate critical medical equipment such as a CPAP machine.

What is the application process for the SAH grant? Refer again to VA M26-12 Manual. It is very helpful to have a sighted spouse or other family member review the forms and paperwork with the blinded veteran as this can save hours in this multi-step and paperwork-intensive process.

Step 1 is **Eligibility Establishment**. The blinded veteran must file VA Form 26-4555 (June 2021 version). Box 12A is signed by the veteran. The form must be submitted to a VA Regional Office (VARO). The Veteran Service Center at any one of VA's 56 VAROs will

render an adjudication decision that will either establish or deny the veteran's eligibility. Errors are common in SAH adjudications for blinded veterans as many adjudicators are still applying the old law. If eligibility is not found, it is important not to give up. Instead, please contact the BVA Veteran Service Program for assistance.

Step 2 is the **Initial Interview**. Here, an SAH Agent will meet with the veteran either in person or by phone to discuss requested adaptations and specific needs, review applicable program requirements, and analyze project feasibility and suitability. The SAH Agent is there to help the veteran identify needs, explain the grant process, set expectations, and coordinate and maximize the veteran's available benefits. The SAH Agent will walk through the veteran's home to help identify potential needs the veteran may not have been aware of or may have overlooked. The SAH grant process is more than just applying for a \$100,000 grant; it is also about identifying what is in the veteran's best interest.

Please note that it is possible to use the SAH grant simultaneously with the \$6,800 HISA (Home Improvements and Structural Alterations) grant administered by the VHA Office of Prosthetics & Sensory Aids (P&SA), and the \$93,356 Independent Living Plan grant administered by the VA Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment program. Each grant has its own set of criteria and must be applied for separately. The funds cannot be commingled. These programs are discussed during the initial interview.

Step 3 is **Feasibility and Suitability**. Here, VA must ensure compliance with 38 U.S.C. Section 2101(a)(3) requiring **Medical Feasibility**, which means that the veteran

must be currently and successfully living full-time in a housing unit and outside of an institutional setting. **Financial Feasibility** involves VA certification that the cost of the proposed housing unit, including the mortgage payment plus incidental expenses, bears a proper relation to the veteran's present and anticipated income and expenses. The veteran cannot be in mortgage forbearance, bankruptcy, or foreclosure.

Property Suitability means that the nature and condition of the proposed housing unit must be suitable for the veteran's needs for dwelling purposes. Minimum Property Requirements (MPRs), if applicable, are discussed with the veteran.

Please note further that, at present, there are no MPRs for blindness. The SAH Agent should do what is in the blinded veteran's best interest. Unless the veteran uses a wheelchair, it is not necessary to modify the home to be wheelchair accessible.

Step 4 is **Conditional Approval**. This step is met when Medical Feasibility, Financial Feasibility, and Property Suitability have all been satisfied. It is the point at which a veteran can begin obtaining work estimates from builders. To avoid a conflict of interest, VA cannot recommend a builder but can assist with resources to help in the search for one. The time between Steps 4 and 5 are indeterminate. During this time, the veteran and SAH Agent should work together to determine the best needs of the veteran.

Step 5 is **Grant Approval**. This is the formal approval by VA management.

Step 6 is **Project Management**. The project has now been given "the okay" to begin construction and is underway. It is managed by the SAH Agent, including processing change orders, disbursing funds to the builder, reviewing compliance inspections, and, most importantly, setting expectations and consistently communicating with the veteran and the builder.

Step 7 is **Final Field Review**. This is the last inspection once all work has been completed. A "Letter of Satisfaction" is signed by the veteran that the contract between the veteran and the builder has been satisfied. However, it does not necessarily mean that the veteran is satisfied with the work (M26-12 Chapter 10.1b). Since VA is not a contracted party, the contract is always between the veteran and the builder.

The process of applying for and then utilizing the SAH grant can be a very lengthy and cumbersome one. However, the time and effort involved can pay large dividends. It is best to work with a BVA National Service Officer, who can educate the blinded veteran on SAH program eligibility requirements and adaptation guidelines, ensure that the most current version of Form 26-4555 is filled out completely and correctly, submit the claim form, monitor the progress of the claim, and, if needed, intervene when the claim goes off track.

Please contact the Veterans Service Program with questions or to request more information.

Connecting with our BVA Donors

by Meredith Buono-DaGrossa

Donor Relations is defined as the comprehensive effort of any nonprofit that seeks philanthropic support to ensure that donors experience high-quality interactions with the organization to foster long-term engagement and investment.

When I joined the BVA staff, I was hoping to foster existing relationships and work to build new, meaningful ones. As a fundraiser, the greatest privilege we have is connecting with those that support the organization of which we are a part. That passion allows our organization to sustain itself and grow.

The beauty of my job is connecting with people. When you pick up the phone or contact a donor, you never know what you will learn. Sometimes a 15-minute conversation can reveal much more than you initially intended. The same can result from a handwritten note, or simply expressing genuine concern to someone who has experienced a recent problem or adversity.

I feel prompted to share a recent interaction I had with one such donor by telephone.

Tina Jannise-Lewis reached out to us to inform us of a can-collecting drive she was conducting as part of a “Get Fit Challenge” for her place of employment. Tina decided to take that challenge to the next level by walking and collecting cans that she would turn in to raise money for BVA. Upon speaking with Tina, I learned that her motivation for supporting our veterans was strong. Her father, Joe Lewis, served in Vietnam and is blind. Her two children are currently serving in the Army and in the

National Guard. In addition, Tina’s mother is a monthly sustaining giver to BVA.

After speaking with Tina for several minutes, we determined that BVA services were needed by her family. We were able to connect her with Jim Vale, National Service Director, Veterans Benefits and Policy, so that he could review her father’s VA records to help identify missing benefits. Jim was also able to connect Tina with the appropriate resources and information relating to membership.

These connections are crucial in many ways. They get to the heart of BVA’s work. Without that interaction I had with Tina, we would not have learned of the passionate support of the organization by the Lewis family and that BVA could be of help to them. We can take that initial conversation and perhaps make a real impact in another’s life while they do the same for us.

In my previous development work in the nonprofit sector, and now with BVA, I have sometimes found myself thinking again about the criteria generous Americans inevitably use when selecting charities that they feel comfortable supporting. For example, the questions I’ve contemplated include: What sets one organization apart from another? How does a person, family, or small business decide which cause is worthy of a donation from them?

Inevitably, I always come back to the assurance that it’s that sincere personal touch that truly makes the difference!



Chaplain's Corner

by Dr. Ron Lester

As I was thinking about the current winter season, my thoughts went back to a day that is now some 45 years in the past. I was working my bees that day. It was March of 1977 and at that time I had around 150 beehives. I always put on my screen and helmet, plus the overalls and those thick leather gloves for maximum protection.

It was a nice warm day for Oklahoma, and I figured I could work the bees without a problem. I came to one of the hives and smoked it really well. Notwithstanding that success, something just did not feel right. Normally, when smoked, the bees will fill up with honey thinking that their hive is on fire.

As I opened up that hive, the bees came swarming out at me! They were in such a protected posture that I got the blast of *their* fire! I was attacked from every side with such force that I closed the hive up very slowly and retreated to the underside of my truck hoping that I did not get stung too many times.

After waiting for more than an hour for that hive to settle down, I finally came home, still not knowing how much I'd been stung. My wife scraped more than 20 stingers off my face and arms!

When bees sting, they give it their all, leaving behind a piece of themselves out of protection for their hive as the ultimate sacrifice since they end up dying afterwards.

These bees were saying: "Don't mess with me!"

They were also saying: "One for all and all for one!"

How often do we quickly jump to protect our loved ones? When we do this, attempting to aid a friend or family member, it sometimes hurts! In this respect we are like the bees.

Other times, however, we are more like I was in dealing with the bees. We get angry if things do not go the way we think they should. Many of us have been stung by a friend, a company we worked for, or even a member of our family. Instead of ending up in more trouble by going back to the bees, we may need to take a little time and back off. Instead of holding onto the sting, I encourage you to scrape it off immediately and not let the sun go down on your anger. It can be so difficult to forgive those who have hurt us, but I've found it is far better to forgive than to hate.

Let us take a lesson from the bees: Do not borrow more trouble than needed. Let us take another lesson from me: Back off, heal, and forgive.

Ephesians 4:26, New International Version, reads: "In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry."

I hope all is going exceptionally well for each of you. I don't know about you, but I am expecting and believing that this year, 2022, is going to be far better than the previous two years. I am hoping and praying that we will redouble our thirst and hunger for God this year! I hope we will discover the unique paths God has for each of us and that such paths will begin to unfold before our very eyes.



Of Note

Veterans Legacy Memorial Keeps Veteran Stories Alive

by James LaPaglia

National Cemetery Administration

Glen Dill enlisted in the U.S. Army during World War II and served as a Sergeant of the 745th Tank Battalion that landed on Omaha Beach on D-Day. While on active duty, he was awarded the Purple Heart and Silver Star. After his military service, he developed macular degeneration which left him legally blind, but he continued to serve his country with a 26-year career at the Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Isaac Woodard, Jr. served as a Sergeant in the U.S. Army during World War II in the Pacific Theater. After his discharge in 1946, as he was traveling back to his family in North Carolina, he was beaten and blinded by police officers in a South Carolina town. His case caused a national outcry, and in response, President Truman established a Civil Rights Commission and desegregated the U.S. Military.

A longtime member of BVA, Dr. George Stocking was a U.S. Air Force First Lieutenant fighter pilot during the Korean War and went on to spend more than 40 years as a Rehabilitation Psychologist at the VA Medical Center in Miami.

So that their stories and others like them will continue to be told and seen by others, the National Cemetery Administration provides the Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) website, www.va.gov/remember, the nation's first digital platform dedicated entirely to the memory of more than 4.3 million veterans

interred in VA's national cemeteries and in VA grant-funded cemeteries.

Launched in 2019, individual veteran profile pages are populated with military service and cemetery information. This publicly available information is gathered from VA records and includes service branch with logo, dates of birth and death, rank, war period, decorations, emblem of belief, and cemetery information.

Interactive features added to the site in 2020 and 2021 now allow family, friends, and others to post tributes (comments), upload images, share their veteran's military service timeline and achievements, biographical information, historical documents, and more. The site also allows visitors to share veteran profile pages by email and post them to Facebook and Twitter.

Content is submitted using various text fields, drop-down choices, and drop-drag options. All content is reviewed by VLM moderators before being posted to veteran pages to ensure it conforms to the VLM User Policy and appropriately honors veterans. Currently more than 30,000 items have been posted to veteran pages.

To see and contribute to Glen Dill's VLM page, go to <https://www.vlm.cem.va.gov/GLENJUNIORDILL/43AF008>.

To see and contribute to Isaac Woodard's VLM page, go to <https://www.vlm.cem.va.gov/ISAACWOODARDJR/20A424C>.

To see and contribute to George Stocking's VLM page, go to <https://www.vlm.cem.va.gov/GEORGEEDWARDSTOCKING/7925843>.

VA Secretary Addresses Veteran Homelessness

Across the United States, more than 37,000 veterans experienced homelessness in 2019, a number VA Secretary Denis McDonough said is about half of what it was in 2009.

Addressing a press conference on February 23 at the Salt Lake City Health Care System, the Secretary credited VA's efforts, which include its "housing first" approach for reducing homelessness in veterans. "Housing first" is a model used by many organizations working to help house people who are chronically homeless.

Secretary McDonough said that getting veterans under a roof first and then surrounding them with the other required services such as substance abuse treatment, mental health care, employment training, and management of issues in the justice system was the means to provide the best assistance.

"As we get veterans under roofs and get them that service, we see them continue to thrive," he continued.

He also said partnerships in the community, strong leadership on the local, state, and federal level, and innovative programs are crucial in continuing to tackle homelessness and helping to serve those who served this country.

"Building on those partnerships, using these resources and proven

strategies, I'm confident we'll end veteran homelessness in this country," he stated.

Registration Open for Summer Clinic

Registration for the 2022 National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic (NVSSC), held August 7-12 in San Diego, is open until April 1 and limited to the first 150 veteran applicants.

The Clinic is a rehabilitation sports and recreation event for veterans with disabilities with the primary objective being an improvement in the quality of life for such veterans through exciting summer sports.

Participation is open to veterans whose

VA U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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current rehabilitation goals would benefit from the value of adaptive summer sports and who are actively engaged in VA healthcare in blind rehabilitation, physical rehabilitation, mental health treatment, or therapy for spinal cord injuries, amputations, neurological conditions, PTSD, burns, and traumatic brain injury/polytrauma.

To register or learn more about NVSSC, visit www.summersportsclinic.va.gov and follow VA Adaptive Sports Programs on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at [@Sports4Vets](https://www.instagram.com/Sports4Vets).

Research Results Reveal Impact of Blast Exposure

A recent VA study has found a potential relationship between blast exposures and mental health symptoms in combat veterans that goes beyond the effects of mild traumatic brain injury or PTSD.

The study is believed to be the first of its kind using involved interviews and self-report measures. It includes 275 veterans who served in combat during the post-9/11 conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. More than 70 percent of the subjects of the study had a history of blast exposure, many of whom had not experienced a TBI or PTSD.

“Exposure to blast is an independent factor influencing psychiatric symptoms in veterans beyond PTSD and a mild TBI,” the researchers wrote in their conclusion. “Blast exposure ... should be considered in the cause of psychiatric symptom presentation and complaints.”

The findings of the study appeared in the **Journal of Psychiatric Research** in September 2021, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34500348/>.

Veterans Employed Full-Time Increases in Early 2022

Although the veteran unemployment rate rose in January, so did the number of veterans who found jobs. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in **Military Times** February 4, a rush of veterans re-entering the job market in January reflected a nationwide trend toward higher levels of working-age Americans participating in the workforce.

The unemployment rate for all veterans rose from 3.2 percent in December to 3.8 percent in January, but the number of veterans who had full-time employment rose by more than 430,000 individuals.

Overall, about 8.9 million veterans sought full-time jobs in January, up more than 500,000 individuals from the last month of 2021. Much of that was driven by veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars era. About 200,000 more young veterans reported looking for work in January than in December, pushing the group’s labor participation rate to nearly 80 percent.

Veterans have typically fared better than their civilian peers in the monthly unemployment estimates. January was the 60th time in the last 61 months that the veterans’ unemployment rate was lower than the national rate. Even so, lawmakers in recent years have created a number of targeted jobs programs aimed at transitioning service members and veterans struggling with their return to civilian life.

75 VHA Videos For 75 Years

To support its year-long effort, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) 75th Anniversary campaign created a series of 75 videos.

The video series is an effort to encourage veterans to make more informed choices

about the health care they receive by offering new and additional information highlighting VHA's unique initiatives, innovations, and contributions to medicine, as well as its committed care to America's veterans.

The videos cover dozens of topics, including precision oncology, emergency medicine, VHA moonshots and cancer studies, suicide prevention, and lethal means safety.

The videos are housed at bit.ly/3IwSZ3U.

Asset and Infrastructure Review Report Released

VA has made public the Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) report mandated by The VA MISSION Act passed and signed into law in 2018.

Released on March 14, the report includes recommendations by Secretary McDonough to assure that VA remain the primary, world-

class provider and coordinator of veterans' health care for generations to come. It is the result of years of research and analysis intended to help the Department build a health care network that will best serve U.S. veterans, including underserved and at-risk veteran populations in every part of the country.

The AIR Commission will conduct public hearings as part of its review of VA's recommendations before submitting its own recommendations to the President for further review in 2023. The recommendations center around improving access to care and the quality of that care by ensuring that VA's infrastructure in the decades ahead reflects veterans' needs and 21st century design standards.

Letters to the Editor

Remember the Sacrifices

As a life member of BVA, I appreciate this opportunity to add a few comments related to President Joe McNeil's excellent message in the Autumn issue of **The Bulletin**.

I am a blinded Vietnam era veteran and recently moved to the Frank M. Tejada Veterans Home in Floresville, Texas. Here we have a large group of disabled veterans with service-related wounds, including blindness. Most are in wheelchairs and assisted by a nursing staff.

When we think about the topic addressed by President McNeil, "what is a veteran," we should also consider and be mindful of these lifelong disabled veterans who sacrificed so much to keep us free.

Bruce W. Rider
South Texas Regional Group
Floresville, Texas

TEE Tournament 2022 Update

Hey guys and gals, it's time to get off the couch and get moving! Here is something I thought you might be interested in checking out that is not so strenuous as climbing a mountain or walking the Appalachian Trail but provides an opportunity for therapeutic adaptive sports and other recreational activities—in addition to fellowship and camaraderie.

Those of us who live in the South have an advantage over the rest of the country; we're not snowed or iced in like those in Iowa. By September 11-16 (Sunday-Friday), they will be thawed out, hopefully, and the Iowa City VA Medical Center will host its annual golf clinic better known as the National Disabled Veterans TEE (Training, Exposure, Experience) Tournament. The only thing for which the veteran is responsible is transportation to and from Iowa City, Iowa. The Medical Center there, with support from the community, comes up with 400 volunteers for the event.

Golfing takes place at various courses in the Iowa City area. There are also bowling events and, historically, other events such as air rifle, bicycling, kayaking, and horseback riding. Participation is open to all veterans with visual impairments, traumatic brain injuries, amputations, spinal cord injuries, and other disabilities.

When we asked if the veteran could bring a spouse or escort, we were answered in the affirmative. We were also told that the escort would stay with the veteran and, ideally, function as the veteran's golf buddy during the program. This would involve the escort driving the golf cart and assisting the veteran in judging distance and direction to the hole before any given swing. I guess they just don't trust blind veterans driving around on a well-groomed pasture!

The first day for applications was January 24 and the number of participants is limited. Applications are available at www.veteransgolfclinic.org.

I have been in contact with Director Nick Beelner and he says you need no experience. They will teach you everything. You may not be able to go on the pro circuit after one week, but he says you will have a good time.

Gary Schoelerman
Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group
Breaux Bridge, Louisiana

Additional Accessibility Options for Reading The Bulletin

Readers of the last couple of issues may have noticed the absence of the Voiceye codes in the top right corner of each page. With the codes no longer available to BVA, the QR code at right will take readers directly to **The Bulletin** page on the BVA website, where current and past issues are accessible in PDF, Word, and audio format.



In Remembrance

The Blinded Veterans Association deeply regrets
the passing of the following blinded veterans.

Alabama R.G.

Thomas Bowen
Cephus Edmonson

Arkansas R.G.

William Browning
William Sadler

Florida R.G.

John Lynd
Donald McMannis

Gem State R.G.

Tommy Tubbs

Greater Houston R.G.

Marc Francis
Kenneth Hunter

Louisiana/Mississippi R.G.

Arthur Behlar
Freddie Davis

Michigan R.G.

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Mid-Atlantic R.G.

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Southern Arizona R.G.

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Southern California R.G.

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Richard Gilchrist
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Tennessee R.G.

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Final Thought

“Team BVA” stems from an earlier initiative, originally designed by the Blinded Veterans Association under a different name, to support the hundreds of men and women returning to the United States blinded or experiencing significant visual impairment.

Most of the early participants in the program fought in the Global War on Terror, which included Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The program has now widened its participation to include all eras of visually impaired veterans.

Pictured here during Team BVA’s January week in Steamboat Springs and vicinity, Rocky Mountain Regional Group President William Mathis exits a half pipe on his snowboard. A halfpipe is a U-shaped slope allowing the snowboarder to go from wall to wall, performing aerial tricks on both sides.

