BVA ANNUAL CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY
MARCH 6, 2024
Cover Photo: In a joint hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs held March 6, BVA National President Paul Mimms, pictured to the right of former North Carolina Senator Elizabeth Dole, gave oral testimony outlining the Association’s active legislative priorities. Details about the testimony and the accompanying written document submitted for the Congressional Record are reported in this issue of The Bulletin.

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Published quarterly by and for blinded veterans and sent to all blinded veterans without charge. The Bulletin informs BVA members about their Association and the issues that affect blind and low vision veterans.
As most of us are aware, the Blinded Veterans Association was established in 1945. At that time, there were no specialized adaptive devices for blinded veterans, nor were there programs established for their specialized care. BVA’s founders and early pioneers had a vision of the future that included the delivery of such benefits for blinded veterans.

In March 2024, BVA reached a 79-year milestone that few could have envisioned in 1945. During those 79 years, we have untiringly advocated for the rights, benefits, and services that have, little by little, become a reality. In 1958, the organization was chartered by the United States Congress to be the only Veterans Service Organization (VSO) specifically empowered by and invested with the federal legislative branch to represent the blinded veteran community. We continue as such today in that unique role.

BVA’s national leadership in the early years also believed that it was more important for veterans to join the organization than it was to raise funds. From the beginning, BVA did not have a vast treasury to run things and, to this day, our membership dues are not used to finance operations. The funds are deposited in a separate fund and used for the support of the membership.

Throughout our history, financing has come largely from individual voluntary donations, private sector corporate donations, direct mail, and bequests. We have never received federal funds for the operation of our organization. Despite the latter disadvantage, BVA has made some significant accomplishments that benefit blinded veterans greatly. Among those is the elimination of the $795 co-pay to participate in blind rehabilitation services that came with the establishment of Category 4 (catastrophic disability) to include blinded veterans.

BVA was also instrumental in the passage of legislation that brought beneficiary travel to blinded veterans. Beneficiary travel opens the door for veterans who have a hard time even getting to their nearby Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center, let alone travel to an out-of-state residential program. The beneficiary travel benefit picks up veterans at their door and transports them to the door of the rehabilitation facility. The process is repeated when the veterans return home.

I believe it is notable to point out that BVA did not just advocate for these existing benefits and services. We have also been called on, and have answered the call, to partner with VA to create appropriate benefits and services at the Blind Rehabilitation Centers (BRCs). BVA played an important role also in the creation and perpetuation of the Visual Impairment Service Team (VIST) programs with their respective Coordinators. Later, we impacted the creation of the Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialist (BROS) position and additional programs delivered by VA Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS). These include facilities that administer Visual Impairment Services Outpatient Rehabilitation
(VISOR) and Visual Impairment Centers to Optimize Remaining Sight (VICTORS).

As we have moved forward trying to perform our mission, the economy has undergone several changes that make it more difficult for us to survive on a model that is dependent on direct mail donations and the providence of timely gifts from wills and trusts. The atmosphere in which we function, truly as a business, has changed and become more competitive for us as an organization.

To continue operating, the organization has devised different strategies to effectively fund programs. An example is that of legislative advocacy on Capitol Hill. Compared to the number of staff members in other VSOs, ours is small. We are accomplishing considerable work with few people. Our efforts to reduce the size of our staff, coupled with the implementation of other cost-saving measures, have been the primary means of keeping us financially solid.

When I first joined BVA, I didn’t believe that my paid membership dues were going to be sufficient to pay for everything of value that I could possibly receive from the organization. That supposition has proven to be correct over the years. There is an excellent bang for my buck and for that reason I am proud to say that I am a monthly donor of a hundred dollars to BVA. I believe that that’s among the least of the things I can do to support this organization that has done so much for me and my cohort of blinded veterans. I hope that others among you feel the same way and would be willing to join me in donating. I’m not asking for a hundred a month from everybody. In fact, I would ask that you consider donating five dollars or more. That donation would be no less important to us than my donation of a hundred. Every donation will help, and every donation is equally important.

As BVA members, we have forged ahead as a team, a coalition, a group, a unit, or any other positive way you would want to use in describing our membership. Our investment in that membership is not measured in the amount in membership dues collected but in what we are willing to give of ourselves in return for what we have received and for what our successors will later gain.

I hope that many of you will consider my plea—that as many of you as possible will consider donating any amount of money you can on a monthly basis in order for us to begin to establish an income stream that is consistent and continuous, providing the capability to empower BVA to perform its mission as it now has for 79 years.
Legislative Update
by Donald D. Overton, Jr.

What is Annual Congressional Testimony?

BVA is the only national VSO chartered by Congress and exclusively dedicated to assisting America’s blind and low vision veterans, their families, and caregivers. As Paul referenced in his President’s Page, the BVA Congressional Charter designates the organization as the official advocate and representative for all blind and low vision veterans before the executive and legislative branches of government. Throughout its more than 79 years of existence, BVA has successfully carried out this important function while at the same time contributing meaningfully to making life better for thousands of individual blind and low vision veterans from across the country.

Each year, VSOs convene during a joint hearing conducted by the House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs. The hearing (often referred to as annual testimony) focuses on topics such as recommending new policies, regulations, or operations affecting VA. Although testifying at a hearing can be intimidating, the hearings play an important role in the legislative process by providing information to Congress that can influence committee recommendations and votes. Wide varieties of witnesses are called each year to testify before Congressional committees regarding critical issues. Through these hearings, Congress is able to delve into practically every facet of life in America.

If you should ever find yourself called to testify before Congress, the process will involve a number of different activities, including creating written testimony, delivering oral testimony, and answering questions posed by the relevant committee.

There are three basic elements that form the essentials of a Congressional hearing in which testimony is given. First, there must be a witness or someone who appears before the committee to provide testimony as a knowledgeable source or expert. In BVA’s case, the witness is usually the National President or members of the Government Relations Team. Second, there must be testimony, which refers to either oral or written statements that are presented to the committee by a witness for the purpose of providing information about an issue involving policy. Finally, there is a Congressional committee, a panel comprised of Members of Congress who are responsible for conducting the hearing, receiving testimony, and questioning witnesses.

Congressional committees have a variety of responsibilities: They review proposals for legislation, consider bills that fall under their jurisdiction, conduct research for decision-making, and produce and advance legislative proposals. They also approve, report, and recommend legislation for consideration.

The hearings process is often used by committees for the purpose of obtaining relevant information and developing a body of reliable facts, particularly when a committee conducts research on issues they...
are reviewing. The agenda of a committee and a committee hearing frequently revolves around accomplishing these objectives. Because Congress and its committees rely on critical information to carry out their legislative, institutional, and oversight responsibilities, both oral and written testimony are essential to the overall process. For a witness, the testimony must be prepared in a thoughtful and effective manner. BVA staff spend considerable time throughout the year identifying issues to be addressed during the annual testimony. For this 2nd Session of the 118th Congress, BVA has chosen to prioritize the following:

- Ensuring that VA implement caregiver benefits for catastrophically “blinded” disabled veterans, mandating the modification of eligibility criteria regarding “Activities of Daily Living” to include caregivers for blinded veterans; and that VA create a clinical eligibility standard for blindness in both eyes defined as 20/200 or worse or a visual field of 5 degrees or less.”

- Fulfilling its Congressional oversight role with respect to the VA Veteran Travel Service (VTS) program, BVA calls on VA to identify and document challenges with which blinded veterans are dealing when trying to get to and from their medical appointments. Further, BVA requests that VIST Coordinators be granted the authority to make clinical determinations for Special Mode Transportation (SMT) authorizations for blind and low vision veterans.

- Mandating that VA immediately reinstate the following language into the VA Community Care Standardized Episode of Care (SEOC): Eye Care Comprehensive Guidelines that “only ophthalmologists can perform invasive procedures, including injections, lasers, and eye surgery.”

- Requesting that Congress be mindful of the appropriate roles of optometry and ophthalmology as it seeks to establish national standards of practice within VA Healthcare Systems.

- Petitioning Congress to enact S. 2516, “The Veterans Accessibility Act of 2023,” which would establish a Veterans Advisory Committee on Equal Access at VA. The Advisory Committee would issue regular reports to Congress, the public, and other agencies on VA’s compliance with federal disability laws, including the Americans with Disabilities Act.

• Petitioning Congress to enact Fiscal Year 2024 appropriations of $30 million for the Department of Defense (DOD) Congressionally Directed Medical Research Program (CDMRP) Vision Research Programs (VRP), which would strengthen the only research program focused on prevention and treatment of military-related ocular trauma and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) visual dysfunction.

• Petitioning Congress to provide adequate funding to the Veterans Health Administration’s BRS and to continue improvement of programs and services for women veterans.

• Calling on Congress to enact adequate protections for guide dogs and service dogs on federal properties.

• Ensuring that Congress implement the Fiscal Year 2024-2025 Independent Budget recommendations for Prosthetics and Sensory Aids.

• Petitioning Congress to pass S. 344, the “Major Richard Star Act,” which would provide combat-disabled uniformed services retirees with fewer than 20 years of creditable service to concurrently receive, without reduction, veterans’ disability compensation and retired pay or combat-related special compensation.

• Calling on Congress to enact H.R. 6551, the “Heroes Earned Affordable Lifts Act,” which sets the VA reimbursement rate at the General Services Administration (GSA) reimbursement rate of 65.5 cents per mile traveled.

BVA remains concerned with web accessibility at VA. The VA’s Office of Inspector General issued a report revealing that the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Compensation Service did not comply with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and that VBA continued to fail to coordinate with relevant agencies. BVA is proud to have championed the enactment of S. 3587, “Department of Veterans Affairs Website Accessibility Act of 2019,” requiring VA to address these shortcomings.

The value of BVA’s annual testimony cannot be understated. Even so, the testimony is still not the only opportunity for BVA and its members to engage with Congress. Be on the lookout for a tool that we will introduce shortly that will allow BVA constituents and stakeholders to support the organization’s efforts in this manner! In the meantime, to enjoy the section of the hearing containing Paul’s oral testimony only, via YouTube, go to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eA5P_iBuxI8&t=9359s. To read the annual written testimony, visit https://bva.org/government-relations.

BVA is constantly seeking the support of legislators to enact policies that will assist blind and low vision veterans. We monitor favorable legislation and try to keep our members apprised of the latest information about it.

The Government Relations Team represents our members on Capitol Hill during Congressional committee meetings and with individual Congressional members and their staff. BVA has successfully supported several key pieces of legislation in the past and looks forward to continuing to fight the good fight in the future for our members, their families, and caregivers.
Members of the Blinded Veterans Association who are keeping up with news disseminated through the organization’s weekly electronic newsletter, BVA Happenings, were recently reminded of BVA’s official founding on March 28, 1945. While some prefer to refer to the date as an anniversary, others prefer to use the term birthday.

Whatever the chosen terminology, who among the founding members could have or would have imagined a BVA with the same name and mission in 2024? Only the truly visionary could have had that kind of foresight and perspective, and perhaps some of them really were that idealistic. We can only speculate.

In his 1999 publication Journey to Excellence, the late Korean War-blinded veteran Stephen Miyagawa, also a BVA member, described the conditions leading up to the founding of the Association. The program at Avon Old Farms Army Convalescent Hospital in Connecticut was designed and administrated by the Army Medical Corps to promote the personal and social adjustment of the Army and Navy service personnel who had incurred blindness. The Navy then, for a variety of reasons, decided against sending their blinded patients to Old Farms.

From the perspective of the war blinded, Miyagawa wrote, the Army had created a successful program that fostered a society of men associated in a brotherly union, despite the fact that camaraderie among the trainees was often not exemplary. The men recognized that by organizing, they would in the future gain mutual benefits and aid for all blinded veterans.

Instrumental in promoting this idea was Baynard Kenrick, an author who was allowed interaction with the blinded veterans at Old Farms. His novel, Lights Out, featured a blinded veteran from World War II. Kendrick was the motivating force behind the idea to get an organization started, and he advertised and promoted a March 28 meeting at 8:45am that attracted approximately a hundred men. Before the day was over, elected officers had shaped, formed, created, and given a name to their new organization--the Blinded Veterans Association, abbreviated there and then by the letters B-V-A.

When BVA decided to move its headquarters from Farmington, Connecticut, to New York City, Kendrick agreed to donate
one year of his time away from his writing career to man an office, raise funds, travel extensively to aid any blinded veteran in need, and train two blinded veterans to take over BVA’s administration.

The organization was incorporated in the state of New York in 1947. A year later, the national office was moved to Washington, DC to be able to work more closely with the Veterans Administration and the U.S. Congress. In 1958, the BVA leadership secured a Congressional charter. Henceforth, the Association grew stronger and became a viable organization which can now boast of 79 years of existence, steady growth, and service through successful advocacy and processing of veterans’ claims.

BVA Partnership Profiles

OrCam Devices Instill Confidence, Independence

OrCam’s mission is to harness the power of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to create innovative wearable and handheld devices that enhance independence and confidence in individuals’ everyday lives. OrCam, a trailblazing company in the field of assistive technology, has been dedicated since its inception to empowering individuals who are blind, visually impaired, or have reading difficulties.

The journey began in 2015 with the introduction of the original OrCam MyEye device, marking a significant advancement in assistive technology. Fast forward to 2024, and OrCam continues to lead the way with the release of the MyEye 3 Pro equipped with an interactive AI assistant. The MyEye 3 is the latest generation of our wearable multifunctional device.

In 2020, OrCam introduced the OrCam Read, a handheld device designed to assist individuals with reading difficulties. Its groundbreaking features earned it the prestigious CES 2021 Best of Innovation Award, highlighting OrCam’s commitment to excellence. Building on this success, OrCam recently launched the OrCam Read 3, a smart magnifying all-in-one solution that further expands the capabilities of the company’s assistive technology lineup.

OrCam is a proud sponsor of the Blinded Veterans Association and values its partnership and members. All of these devices are dispensed by VA, and veterans who have VA health care coverage and are low vision or legally blind may qualify to receive an OrCam device, the cost of which is fully covered by VA. Please reach out at usorcam@orcam.com or call OrCam at 888-404-4886 with questions.

Empowering Blinded Veterans: Dot Inc. and BVA Join Forces

Dot Inc. stands at the forefront of innovation, revolutionizing accessibility
for the visually impaired with their groundbreaking refreshable tactile displays, including the Dot Pad and its main creativity tool, Dot Canvas. Committed to inclusivity and empowerment, Dot Inc. is reshaping the landscape of assistive technology.

This mission is shared by BVA, a stalwart advocate for blind and low vision veterans. BVA champions the well-being and independence of veterans, ensuring that their voices are heard and their needs met. Through a robust network of support and resources, BVA illuminates a path toward resilience and self-reliance.

One way in which BVA is carving out this path is through its VetTech program. VetTech serves as a beacon of innovation in the realm of technological accessibility. By analyzing, educating, and advocating for assistive technologies, VetTech empowers blind and low vision veterans to navigate the digital landscape with confidence. It is within this framework that BVA expresses keen interest in Dot Inc.’s Dot Pad and Canvas, recognizing the transformative potential of these devices in enhancing the lives of blinded veterans.

The partnership between Dot Inc. and BVA was forged with shared goals and vision. Initial discussions centered on leveraging technology to break down barriers and foster independence among visually impaired individuals. However, the journey has not been without its challenges. The global semiconductor shortage posed a significant hurdle, delaying the mass production of Dot Pad devices and impacting their availability to veterans. Yet, through resilience and collaboration, Dot Inc. and BVA navigated these obstacles, emerging stronger and more determined to fulfill their shared mission.

The impact of BVA’s advocacy cannot be overstated. BVA’s Memorandum of Support for Dot Inc. with Texas Instruments was instrumental in securing critical components necessary for the manufacturing of Dot Pad devices in 2022. Furthermore, BVA’s introduction of Dot Inc. to the National Library Service and VA opened doors to broader opportunities for collaboration and outreach. By bridging the gap between technology developers and veterans, BVA continues to pave the way for innovation and accessibility in the assistive technology landscape.

As we look to the future, Dot Inc. reaffirms its commitment to ongoing collaboration with BVA. Together, they embark on new frontiers, including partnerships with researchers from Harvard University to explore the efficacy of the Dot Pad in rehabilitation programs for visually impaired individuals.

With unwavering dedication and mutual respect, Dot Inc. and BVA stand poised to make a profound and lasting impact on the lives of blind and low vision veterans. Dot Inc. extends its heartfelt gratitude to BVA members and the organization’s leadership for the invaluable partnership and unwavering dedication to the well-being of blinded veterans. Together, Dot and BVA are not just transforming assistive technology – they are truly transforming lives.

WayAround Tags Everything

During the BVA 78th National Convention in St. Louis, WayAround provided accessible information about the hotel layout, agenda, room descriptions, and more. Although the venue was quite complicated, blinded veterans and sighted companions were able to get
where they needed to be, on time, using the WayAround mobile application.

WayAround staff helped attendees download the free WayAround Tag & Scan app during registration and gave them a WayTag token so that they could access information about the conference from anywhere. WaySigns placed near each conference room and elevator bay let attendees verify that they were where they intended to be. With four different elevator banks, knowing which elevator you were about to enter was really important.

“The WayAround app, devices, and personnel made our convention much easier to navigate, know the schedules of events, and provided a great deal of orientation,” said BVA National Secretary Tracy Ferro.

WayAround can be as helpful at home as it is at work. Label items in your kitchen, closet, workshop, or office to help identify an item, access relevant information such as instructions or ingredients, and even links to websites or helpful videos. All you need is a smartphone (Apple, Android or Blind Shell 2), the free app, and WayTags. WayAround is registered on Sam.gov, so your local VA can order WayTags for you. WayAround can also provide virtual training for VA staff or tag any VA facility. For more information, email connect@WayAround.com.

First Priority for Oracle Health: Improving the Veteran Experience

Imagine a world in which you no longer feel the need to carry printed or digitized health records from one site of care to another, one in which you have a single, longitudinal health record from the time you raise your right hand for the duration of your life as a veteran. Imagine timely and accurate decisions related to benefit eligibility and a seamless, standardized care experience no matter from which DOD or VA facility you receive care. DOD and VA finally have an opportunity to make this dream a reality.

Oracle Health has the honor of leading the deployment of a new Electronic Health Record (EHR) system spanning DOD, VA, and the U.S. Coast Guard. This single, common system will enable a lifetime of seamless, accessible health care for veterans, service members, and their beneficiaries for generations to come.

To succeed, our focus must remain on improving the veteran experience above all else. Partnerships with VSOs and Military Service Organizations are critical to ensuring that the voices of veterans, particularly blind and low vision veterans, are heard. Whether by providing valuable feedback during Oracle Health-hosted roundtables at BVA’s national convention, or through open and transparent conversations with leadership, BVA has and will continue to ensure that accessibility and the overall care experience for BVA members is a top priority for VA’s EHR Modernization Program.

Oracle Health will fight for the high-quality, consistent health care you’ve earned.
A Jaunt to Jacksonville in July

Planning and preparation are now in full swing as members of the BVA Board of Directors, headquarters staff, and volunteers prepare for the BVA 79th National Convention at the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront in the historic City of Jacksonville, Florida. Official dates for this year’s gathering, carried out in partnership and conjunction with the annual convention of the American Council of the Blind (ACB), are July 5-12, 2024, but BVA-specific events will be limited to July 7-10 (Sunday-Wednesday).

With a rich history and diverse cultural scene, Jacksonville is known for its museums, art galleries, and lively music festivals. The city’s extensive park system, including the stunning Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, provides ample recreational activities and exploration opportunities. The city’s outskirts also sport beautiful beaches and waterways.

BVA registration, which opened on March 15, costs $150 per BVA member. Auxiliary members, guests, and nonmembers will also pay the same $150 registration fee. All registrations must be completed online at BVA.org. The cost includes a convention bag, a T-shirt, entrance to a joint ACB/BVA Exhibit Hall, entrance to business meetings on Monday morning and Tuesday afternoon, the Tuesday afternoon Father Carroll Luncheon, and the newest addition, a Monday evening BVA Gala. An outline of the scheduled events is currently available at https://BVA.org/national-convention.

The Atlantic Ocean is 17 miles from downtown Jacksonville. The city’s main beaches, public and pet-friendly, are Jacksonville Beach, Neptune Beach, Mayport Beach, and Atlantic Beach. The area is also home to surf shops, fresh seafood restaurants, quaint beach boutiques, and parks such as Hanna Park and Dutton Island Preserve.

Located in the historic Riverside district of Jacksonville, the Riverside Arts Market is the premier destination for art lovers, treasure hunters, music fans, and food connoisseurs.
The Bryan-Gooding Planetarium at Jacksonville’s Museum of Science and History takes its audiences to the edge of the universe and beyond. With a 60-foot dome and cutting-edge technology, the venue is the largest single-lens planetarium in the world.

To begin the registration process, visit the “National-Convention” page at https://bva.org/national-convention and locate the Register Now button. Please note that registrations and payments for offsite trips and activities associated with the convention will be processed through ACB and will not open for sign-up until the month of May. The activities will occur every day except Thursday, July 11. For any related questions, please contact Janet Dickelman, ACB Convention Chair, at 651-428-5059 or via email at janet.dickelman@gmail.com. The “when and where” regarding those tours is now available at https://BVA.org/national-convention.

The Hyatt Regency Jacksonville was also the site of the 72nd National Convention in August 2017. The room rate is $99 plus tax of 14.64 percent, single or double. The cost of a guest room with a king bed is $109. Accommodations include free Wi-Fi in guest rooms and social spaces, a refrigerator in each room, and a heated outdoor pool and 24-hour fitness center. Self-parking in the nearby garage on Newnan Street is $15 per 24-hour period with in-out privileges. To receive the group rate, you must register prior to June 14.

As was the case in 2017, convention attendees must arrange their own transportation to and from the Hyatt Regency. Free shuttles are not provided. Uber and Lyft cost approximately $25 and taxi rides cost approximately $10 more. Onsite at the airport, an experienced and very patient Margarine Beaman will have the itineraries that are sent to her in advance.

Stay tuned for additional convention information via the weekly BVA Happenings, the Spring issue of The Bulletin, and the “National-Convention” page of the BVA website.
BVA Loses Last of Founding Members

Leonard J. Sperrazza, one of the approximately 100 attendees at the March 28, 1945 meeting of World War II blinded veterans at Avon Old Farms Army Convalescent Hospital, passed away on January 18, 2024 in Lampasas, Texas. He was born on November 29, 1924.

The historic meeting for which Leonard was best known in BVA circles was the founding of the Blinded Veterans Association at the Connecticut facility that housed, rehabilitated, and trained recently returning veterans. Some were visually impaired while the majority had lost all their sight in World War II combat.

An active member of BVA residing in Buffalo, New York, during the organization’s formative years, Leonard was one of thousands of Allied soldiers who landed on Omaha Beach in Normandy, France, on June 6, 1944. Only 19 at the time, Leonard was a Sergeant in the U.S. Army’s 29th Infantry Division. Before D-Day, there were 200 men in his division. After D-Day, there were only about ten, as he recounted in a Memorial Day feature in the Miami Herald on May 27, 2012. His injuries that day left him with shrapnel in his left leg and a bayonet wound in his left shoulder but with vision still totally intact.

Leonard was subsequently blinded only weeks later in Saint Lo in northwest France. As enemy fire flashed across the sky, Leonard dug a hole and ran for cover. While offering emotional support to another, a mortar shell exploded in front of him. The explosion blinded him totally and broke his teeth. For some 79 years he lived with shrapnel lodged in his face.

Leonard recovered in Valley Forge General Hospital in Pennsylvania and was later sent to Avon Old Farms for blind rehabilitation training. His World War II service earned him a Purple Heart and two oak-leaf pins signifying that he had been wounded three times during the War.

Leonard was also the founder of another organization—Citizens on Patrol Crime Watch in North Miami Beach in 1978. He was a member of the Lions Club, Elks Club, and Kiwanis Club. He loved the guitar, fishing, and bowling. Survivors include his loving wife Marion of Zephyr, Texas, with whom

Pictured above, one of several buildings of the Avon Old Farms Army Convalescent Hospital complex in 1945 where Leonard Sperrazza gathered with fellow blinded veterans to vote for the formal establishment of an organization to which he would belong as both a charter member and a life member for nearly 79 years.
he raised seven children. One of the seven, Therese Mosier, also of Zephyr, Texas, has been a caregiver for both him and Marion for the past several years.

Because of the rural nature of the area, Leonard had most recently been an at-large BVA member unaffiliated with a regional group. Thanks to periodic telephone calls from former District Directors Kevin Jackson and Wade Davis, he retained contact with the organization he actively helped create 79 years ago.

Around BVA

“Visions of BVA” Launches

BVA National Headquarters is pleased to announce the launch of a new podcast, Visions of BVA. Dive deep into our inspiring stories, our accounts of resilience, and the achievements of our blind and low vision veterans. Each episode features interviews, discussions on life-changing technology, and glimpses into the BVA community.

Find Visions of BVA on all major podcast platforms and subscribe today! Don’t forget to leave your feedback and share your thoughts. To listen to Visions of BVA via the Apple podcast platform, go to https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/visions-of-bva/id1731589023.

In the first inspiring episode hosted by Steve Baskis, Visions of BVA delves into the remarkable journey of Corporal Matthew Bradford, who overcame profound challenges after being wounded in Iraq. Throughout the interview, Matthew shares his insights on resilience, the power of a supportive community, and his commitment to live a life of purpose and impact, embodying the true essence of never giving up despite life’s toughest battles.

Born with a deep sense of duty intensified by the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Matthew’s life took a dramatic turn when he sustained injuries that resulted in the loss of his legs and his sight. Yet, his unwavering spirit and determination led him to become the first blind, double amputee to re-enlist in the Marine Corps.

District 2 Selects Joseph Brent Link

In accordance with Article 6, Section 2, Paragraph J, Joseph Brent Link was declared elected by the National Board of Directors as the only candidate. Joe is a 25-year BVA member residing in Norman, Oklahoma. He served in the Navy and brings a wealth of experience to the role.

In his nomination statement, Joe highlighted his commitment to support BVA’s regional groups within District 2. He pledged to collaborate with the membership, National Board of Directors, and crucial BVA stakeholders to further the Association’s mission of advocating for veterans and promoting their well-being.
District 4 Selects Randy Cantrell

In accordance with Article 6, Section 2, Paragraph J, Randy Cantrell was declared elected by the National Board of Directors as the only candidate. Randy is a long-time BVA member who previously served as the Assistant District Director for District 4 and completed the remaining term of the vacated Director position.

In his nomination statement, Randy emphasized his experience and dedication to BVA. He highlighted his involvement as the regional group president for the Spokane Inland Empire BVA Group and his current role as a BVA Ambassador. Randy expressed his strong belief in BVA’s mission and its programs, particularly the Ambassador Program.

BVA congratulates both Joe Link and Randy Cantrell on their selection as we look forward to their continued service and leadership within the Association.

BVA Awarded Grant from Reader’s Digest Partners for Sight Foundation

BVA has received a Reader’s Digest Partners for Sight Foundation (RDPFS) grant to support the Association’s Ambassador Program. Consisting of a national network of trained volunteers, the Ambassador Program provides information about benefits and services available to veterans and connects them with resources they can access through BVA, VA, and local communities.

The RDPFS grant will help BVA further build the program through the development of an Ambassador Success Kit with marketing and communication materials. It will also help strengthen the program’s computer infrastructure.

BVA Participates in Historic Transportation Rule Announcement

On February 29, BVA Executive Director Don Overton and Deputy Director of Government Relations Alek Libbin were present for a White House Convening on Protecting the Safety, Rights, and Dignity of Air Travelers with Disabilities. The invitation originated from BVA’s support of the rights of disabled air travelers, particularly those with visual or mobility impairments.

BVA’s support was influential in an announced proposal of the U.S. Department

Primary advocates behind an announced proposal to revolutionize air travel for the legally blind and others with disabilities: Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, Paralyzed Veterans of America Executive Director Carl Blake, and BVA National Legislative Director Don Overton. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Hunt.
of Transportation (DOT) during the convening that would dramatically expand the rights and protections of airline passengers who are disabled.

The proposal covers the following:

1) Mandates annual, hands-on training for airline staff and contractors who physically assist passengers’ wheelchairs.

2) Allows passengers, at airline expense, to choose the company that will repair or replace their wheelchair if it is mishandled.

3) Clarifies that airlines must provide prompt, safe, and dignified assistance to all passengers with disabilities, including those with vision impairment.

If airlines fall short of any of these standards or mishandle a passenger’s wheelchair, the proposal, if finalized, would make it easier for DOT to hold airlines accountable.

DOT Secretary Pete Buttigieg signed the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) on February 27 and submitted it for publication in the Federal Register. The full NPRM on the DOT website, not yet the official version but which will be revised and posted later, is accessible at https://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/latest-news.

Louisiana Blinded Veterans Shine at Lafayette Cooking Competition

Five blinded veterans from the Louisiana/ Mississippi Regional Group, family members, and friends teamed up in three separate groups to make a significant contribution at a recent southeastern style cookoff at Affiliated Blind of Louisiana in the city of Lafayette.

The January 27 competition, which consisted of a total of 17 competitive teams and a small team of visually impaired judges, offered support to Blind Grace, a nonprofit organization that provides learning opportunities for school-age children through summer camps, field trips, and weekend activities.

Although the contestants and their teams could choose to cook either Gumbo, Jambalaya, or Pastalaya, they were required to make enough of their selection to feed 50 hungry Cajuns. All three BVA teams made Gumbo, as did 13 of the 17 total teams. Only four went the Jambalaya route. Gates were opened to the public and the food was set out for consumption once the judging was complete. More than a hundred hungry guests then swarmed the area and for $10 participated in an all-you-can eat buffet.
“Aside from the monetary proceeds and the best smelling and best tasting Gumbo ever, this event is all about bringing awareness of the blind and visually impaired to the Lafayette community,” said Gary Schoelerman, a first-place finisher along with his wife, Marelle, and fellow Breaux Bridge Lions Club member Holly Landry. The name of the winning team was Stirring Up Trouble.

“The tents were decked out with BVA banners, bronze and acrylic Braille American flags, and an abundance of organizational literature,” Gary continued. “Several of us BVA members left a companion minding the fire in order to visit other booths and contestants who were from all over Louisiana.”

He also commented that most of the contestants were not aware of BVA but curious about the veterans’ era of service and how veterans with sight loss could safely cook over an open flame.

“We were also entertained not only by the antics of the cooking teams but also by live music, face painting, fun jumps, and games,” Gary said. “It allowed for some great camaraderie among the BVA members and let people on the outside know that we can compete with anyone.”

Third place in the competition went to Team BramSap, consisting of BVA members James LeCombe and James Yaeger. They were accompanied by James LeCombe’s son-in-law, Branson Theriot, and James Yaeger’s wife, Tammy. Also in close contention was The Cooking Eauxs consisting of BVA members Francis Arceneaux and Shawntina Gibson, secretary of the regional group. They were accompanied by Francis’s wife, Lynette, and BROS Donna-Sue Sullivan.

Francis Arceneaux proved that keeping a fire going can be accomplished both seated and with less than perfect sight.

Gary made special mention of fellow regional group member Darrel Stoute and his wife, Cheryl. The couple had planned to team up with Gary and Marelle on their Gumbo. Despite major surgery the previous day, Darrel had still hoped to participate. Like any thoughtful, wise, and caring spouse, however, Cheryl disallowed that possibility and the two sat this one out!

**BVA Supports “Time Off to Vote”**

On March 12, Senator Mazie Hirono (D-HI) led 11 of her Senate colleagues in introducing the **Time Off to Vote Act**, legislation that would provide two hours of paid leave to vote in federal elections. Representative Matt Cartwright (D-PA-8) introduced a companion bill in the House of Representatives. At press time, the assigned bill numbers were still pending. BVA is supportive of both bills. The legislation will
simplify the process of voting for our veterans with sight loss and allow more of them to exercise this constitutional right and duty.

“Our population is often confronted with transportation challenges in accessing voting sites and voting systems that this legislation will mitigate, resulting in greater veteran interest in the political process and better voting turnouts in our stakeholder communities,” BVA’s Tim Hornik was quoted in Senator Hirono’s press release announcing the bill.

Zach Tidwell and Zanagrams Earn Golden Apple Award

BVA member Zach Tidwell has defied odds in creating an innovative word game that conquers not only puzzles but barriers, making it a revolutionary invention for inclusive gaming. Zanagrams can use both VoiceOver and Braille. For Zach’s creation he is the recipient of the prestigious AppleVis.com Golden Apple Award for Best Game of 2023. Zach is the first blinded veteran to code an iOS app and game.

“Zach’s spirit and remarkable resilience are awe-inspiring,” said Tim Hornik. “Despite accessibility challenges while developing Zanagrams, he persevered, driven by his ingenuity and vision of a game for everyone, regardless of ability level.”

Overcoming vision loss, Zach found purpose after participating in VA blind rehabilitation and recreational therapy programs, where he was introduced to Tim and BVA. Zach found solace in adaptive sports and recreation therapy through the Eastern Colorado VA Healthcare System. The solace turned to the enthusiasm that motivated an audacious goal of designing an iOS game without sight.

Zach’s path was far from smooth and presented immense challenges, demanding new ways of interacting with technology and a steadfast determination to overcome barriers.

In the process of developing Zanagrams, Zach encountered multiple accessibility barriers in Apple’s developer platform. Together, he and Tim attempted to reach out to Apple’s Chief of Accessibility. Although they had little luck in remediating the issues, Zach remained undeterred and did not allow the setbacks to slow him down.

“Zanagrams’ Golden Apple Award is a testament to Zach Tidwell’s remarkable spirit and the power of inclusive design,” Tim affirmed. “And, like the game, Zach’s goals champion the belief that anything is possible when we come together to support one another.”

Zach and Tim believe that word game enthusiasts or those simply looking for a fresh, accessible challenge should absolutely give Zanagrams a try. Those who do may well discover their next brain-twisting delight while celebrating inclusive gaming and the inspiring story of a blinded veteran who dared to code and conquer.

Zanagrams is available for download in the Apple mobile app store. Feedback and comments are welcome within the app.

BVA Notes Passing of Earl Forstall at 104

Earl Louis Forstall, Sr., very likely BVA’s longest living member in its 79-year history, passed away on March 6 at the age of 104 as an active, admired, and beloved member of the Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group. Born September 23, 1919, Earl was a World War II veteran and lifelong New Orleans resident.
One of seven children, Earl entered the military at age 22 as a Private in the Army Air Corps. As an engine specialist based out of Boise Air Force Base, his first plane was a B-17 flown by actor, pilot, and Brigadier General James “Jimmy” Stewart. Following that first placement, Earl was promoted to Crew Chief and assigned to the B-24 named “Queenie,” which flew 59 missions without a single failure.

Earl was a member of the 8th Army Air Force, 445th Bomber Group, and rose to the rank of Master Sergeant. He was a two-time recipient of the Bronze Star Medal and was also awarded the Good Conduct Medal and Honorable Service Medal. His other citations included European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign, American Campaign, the World War II Victory Medal, and the Marksman Badge with Rifle Bar. His unit was awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation that included a personal citation for him.

Earl married Elizabeth Cole in 1953 and together they raised a family of seven children. The family later added 11 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. With his two brothers he opened a typography enterprise in 1953, “Forstall Typographers/The Ad Shop,” which served the New Orleans advertising and marketing community for 50 years.

Earl’s longtime friend and fellow regional group member Gary Schoelerman provided BVA National Headquarters with accounts of Earl’s most recent birthdays as they occurred. In 2019, for example, Earl celebrated his hundredth birthday at the World War II Museum in New Orleans. The regional group that day sponsored the party with honors and citations from President Donald Trump, Louisiana Senators Bill Cassidy and John Kennedy, Congressman Cedric Richmond, Governor John Bel Edwards, the Museum itself, and Dr. Tom Zampieri, BVA National President at the time.

Earl held several leadership positions in the previous Louisiana Regional Group and attended banquets and regional group get-togethers far past his hundredth birthday. Asked many times about his longevity and how it was possible, Earl humorously attributed it to clean living and a good cocktail every evening!

**Mark April 26 as Last Day For Awards Nominations**

Unsung heroes tirelessly contributing to the betterment of BVA have been the traditional impetus behind the Association’s Awards Program. They stand as a beacon, celebrating the exceptional accomplishments of fellow blind and low vision veterans, as well as the unwavering commitment they exhibit in supporting their comrades. The program is not limited to the membership but extends its spotlight to the extraordinary professionals and volunteers who go above and beyond their regular duties.

“These awards are crafting a legacy of selfless service that resonates in the hearts of veterans and their families,” said National Membership Coordinator Teresa Galgano.

“Now is the time for you to nominate a BVA member whose lifetime achievements symbolize what ‘blinded veterans helping blinded veterans’ truly means, or what it means to be an effective regional group leader or VA volunteer, or an excellent VA blind rehabilitation specialist.”
Applications must be submitted online, emailed to membership@bva.org, or mailed via the U.S. Postal Service to the Blinded Veterans Association, PO Box 90770, Washington, DC 20090, by Friday, April 26. The annual awards are:

- **Melvin J. Maas Award**
  The Major General Melvin J. Maas Award for Professional Achievement, the highest honor bestowed by BVA, is presented annually to one individual, chosen for outstanding demonstration of the principles of initiative, independence, and self-reliance.

- **Irving Diener Award**
  The Irving Diener Award for outstanding service to one’s regional group was established in 1961 when businessman Irving Diener sent BVA $50 to present to the distinguished veteran who had best served, and contributed to the success of, their own regional group during the current fiscal year. The stipend was originally the amount of life membership dues for one veteran. The three most recent national presidents are the judges of the nominees.

- **David L. Schnair Award**
  BVA established this award in 1994 in honor and memory of World War II veteran David L. Schnair, a member of the BVA Board of Directors and a BVA volunteer for nearly five decades. The award may be given to a BVA volunteer, member, or BVA Auxiliary member. The award has traditionally been presented to an individual working in a BVA Volunteer Office who has provided at least one year of consistent and outstanding service.

- **Certificates of Appreciation**
  These certificates recognize individuals, groups, and employers who have provided outstanding services to blind and low vision veterans, their families, or to BVA at the national level. The services could include the creation of greater awareness of blind and low vision veterans, their abilities, and their achievements. Typical recipients are, but are not necessarily limited to, VA employees (Visual Impairment Team Coordinators, Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialists, etc.) or individuals and agencies engaged in blind rehabilitation. BVA members, their family members, and Association employees are not eligible for Certificates of Appreciation.

  For more information about the awards or to submit a nomination, please visit BVA.org or send an email to membership@BVA.org.

**Applications Due April 30 for Gruber Scholarships**

Dive into the opportunities offered by BVA’s Kathern F. Gruber Scholarships – a chance like no other for spouses, dependent children, and grandchildren of blind and low vision veterans seeking support for their higher education tuition. Five awards valued at $2,000 each are available for the 2024-25 academic year. The scholarships are a valuable resource for your family’s educational aspirations.

The application process is straightforward with applicants evaluated on merit by a select committee. Although the Gruber scholarships for veterans’ dependents are awarded for one year, the even better news is that students can re-apply and receive the award up to four times. This allowance can offer a steady support system throughout an educational journey.
Noteworthy is that the recipient’s blind or low vision veteran family member is not required to be a BVA member for the spouse, child, or grandchild to be eligible for a scholarship. It is an inclusive opportunity to ease the financial burden of higher education.

Explore the possibilities, apply, and let the BVA’s Kathern F. Gruber scholarships be a steppingstone toward achieving your educational goals! Additional resource information and application materials, due Tuesday, April 30, can be submitted online or via the U.S. Postal Service. The resources are available at https://bva.org/programs/scholarships.

New BVA Online Store Offers Simple Merchandise Purchasing

The first edition of the long anticipated BVA Store is now a reality. The official link to the items is https://supplyroom.com/bva/. As the Association works with the new vendor, The Supply Room, the items available will expand. However, there are several items ready for purchase now.

A portion of each sale is donated back to BVA. Veterans who have problems of any type on the site can call the company on 800-458-5180 to place the order. BVA National Headquarters is interested in customer feedback about the site and the merchandise.

Northern Virginia Dentist Recognized for Generous Support

A week before the holidays National Service Director Duayne Driscoll dropped off a basket of holiday goodies and a special BVA Challenge Coin for a loyal Association supporter and patriot whose dental practice, Kenmore Family Dental Care, is located just minutes from the National Headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia.

Dr. Heejo Han poses with a BVA holiday goody basket, gifted in recognition of both his monthly support of BVA’s work as well as his patriotism.

Dr. Heejo Han, an experienced dentist with a unique approach to serving his patients, opened his own dental practice earlier this year with his wife, Amelia, after years of working in a corporately owned setting. Dr. Han has offered to partner with BVA as a sponsor of future recreational rehabilitation activities. He also committed to donate a specified amount to the organization for each new patient he receives in the foreseeable future. True to his word, Dr. Han sends a check to BVA each month.

Included in that group of new patients is Duayne Driscoll himself.

“I was looking for a dentist when I heard about Dr. Han and I couldn’t be happier with my decision to now be a patient of his,” Duayne said. “I love what he does for me as a dentist, but I also admire him as a real patriot who loves this country.”

Dr. Han and BVA are essentially neighbors! The practice is a 13-minute drive and 3.4 miles from the BVA office.
Grandpa’s White Cane Now Available through NLS BARD

The audiobook version of Grandpa’s White Cane, by Jim Hoxie and Joanna Jones with cartoonist and former reporter Alex Portal as Illustrator, is now available through Braille and Audio Reading Download (BARD), a program of the National Library Service (NLS) for the Blind and Print Disabled of the Library of Congress. A resident of South Dakota, Jim is a member of BVA’s Midwest North Regional Group.

Print copies of Grandpa’s White Cane (see adjacent graphic) have already been distributed free to hundreds of ophthalmologists, optometrists, schools for the blind, and elementary schools across the United States and Canada since its first printing in September 2020. Jim and Joanna wrote the book primarily for children, but it is also instructive for those with sight loss. The story details the experience of a grandfather with sight loss due to glaucoma, which is diagnosed by an ophthalmologist who suggests using a white cane while relating several benefits of doing so.

Shortly after the diagnosis, because of his status as a veteran of the U.S. Military, Grandpa attends the VA Central Blind Rehabilitation Center in Hines, Illinois, where he regains his confidence to live independently. He receives training in orientation and mobility with a white cane, relearns how to engage in activities of daily living and communication, and is provided with manual skills training for hobbies and household repair.

BVA Joins Other VSOs in Urging Marijuana Rescheduling

The Blinded Veterans Association has united with several other VSOs in advocacy of the “expeditious” easing of federal restrictions on marijuana, a stance that has garnered national attention.

The coalition of organizations, which includes Iraq-Afghanistan Veterans of America, AMVETS, American GI Forum, the American Legion, and the Minority Veterans of America, sent a letter on February 22 to the Justice Department, which oversees the Drug Enforcement Administration. The letter advocated quick action in rescheduling the drug from Schedule 1, which reflects a high potential for abuse, to Schedule 3, which is far less restrictive.

VIST Coordinator Supports Barrett’s Chess Prowess

David Barrett, Mid-Atlantic Regional Group, recently played against Chess International Grandmaster Rashad Babaev of Azerbaijan in a simultaneous chess exhibition on January 27 at an indoor shopping mall in Manassas, Virginia. To prepare for the match, David used a chess board made for the blind that was provided to him by his
VIST Coordinator Courtney Whatley’s extra mile efforts with an accessible chess board for blinded veteran David Barrett, pictured here, helped him successfully compete in a recent simultaneous chess exhibition hosted by renowned international grandmaster of chess Rashad Babaev at the Manassas, Virginia, Mall near his home.

VIST Coordinator, Courtney Whatley of the Washington, DC, VA Medical Center. The board, pictured here with David (far right), Babaev himself, and onlookers, was bright black and white.

Simultaneous exhibition in this case means several competitors and several matches going against the Grandmaster all at once.

“Grandmaster Babaev played 50 people all at once,” said David. “I was lucky enough to finish in the top half, but it still took more than three hours.”

He also said that any chess player could sign up to compete, but that the demand to participate was high and he was fortunate to be selected. From everything he could see, there were no other blind or visually impaired participants.

David Barrett is a Coast Guard and law enforcement veteran from Haymarket, Virginia. He has also raised funds for BVA while playing music in the street or other public places in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area with his bagpipes and Irish whistles. In 2021, he released an album of music entitled “Starting to See—Tunes to Support our Blinded Veterans,” giving away CDs with requests for donations. For more information about David’s music, visit https://visionpiping.bandcamp.com/album/starting-to-see.

Thank You, Biloxi BRC

National Secretary Tracy Ferro represented Paul Mimms in presenting BVA Challenge Coins to the leadership of the Gulf Coast BRC in Biloxi, Mississippi, to recognize the facility’s outstanding performance.

The February 27 presentation recognized and expressed thanks to BRC Chief Debra Gilley and Assistant Chief Nicole James, pictured as a group in front of the Bronze Braille Flag donated to the BRC by the Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group. The excellence of the Center came to Paul’s

Additional Accessibility Options for Reading The Bulletin

Readers of the last few 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.
attention repeatedly during his recent stay of several weeks to receive additional rehabilitation training and upgraded technological devices.

**Atlanta Chapter Supports Foster Kids for Christmas**

BVA’s Atlanta Chapter participated in a Clark Howard Kids Toy Drive that culminated on December 3, 2023. The drive is named for an Atlanta business entrepreneur and philanthropist. For 33 years the Clark Howard Foundation has collected contributions during the holiday season to purchase toys for children in the Georgia Foster Care System.

The Chapter presented a $500 check to Rebecca Jennings, Human Resources Manager for the Foundation’s Department of Family and Children’s Services, which was responsible for the Secret Santa Campaign.

The presentation occurred at a campaign event held at a Walmart in Roswell, Georgia. “Donating to Clark Howard Kids is the chapter’s way of connecting with the community,” said President Loretta Phillips. “After this experience we definitely want to make this an annual event.”

Left to right, WSB Radio Personality Belinda Skelton, Loretta Philips, Georgia Regional Group President Dennis Darnes, and Chapter 2nd Vice President Arline Kitchen.
Auxiliary’s View
by Robert Murphy

I hope you had an enjoyable holiday season and a great start to the New Year! I wanted to bring you up to date on the many things we’ve done since last year’s convention and what lies ahead as we continue to rebuild our organization.

We are grateful to those who willingly stepped up to serve in some of our most vital roles. Without these volunteers, the Auxiliary would have continued to decline. Thank you in particular to the following:

**BVAA Board Members**
- Sherri Bates-Harris – Vice President
- Benjamin Holmes – Secretary
- Karin Myron – Treasurer
- Hurtis Lilly – Reporter

**Bylaw Committee**
- Sue Cantrell
- Hurtis Lilly
- Shirley Cook

**Membership Committee**
- Kathy Ferro
- Roxie Williams
- Hurtis Lilly
- Karin Myron

**Appointees**
- Roxie Williams – Chaplain
- Kathy Ferro – BVA Liaison

We left the convention with four primary initiatives: 1) Correct our organization’s name with the IRS and all media locations to reflect the original charter, “Blinded Veterans Association Auxiliary,” 2) Revise our bylaws with the support of the BVA Judge Advocate, 3) Revive our membership with more consistent communication, and 4) Reconnect with individuals whose memberships have expired.

Your Bylaw Committee has been meeting regularly and is currently 50 percent complete with recommended revisions. Once that has been completed, we’ll follow the protocol to move them forward.

Your Membership Committee has touched base with every current member and, along with great assistance from BVAA member Debbie Frick, we have contacted former members whose membership lapsed during the past two years.

I encourage you to download the Zoom mobile app for future meetings if you do not already have it. This will give us an opportunity to see and hear from one another. We look forward to sharing new information on all we are doing to get organized and grow.

I have also included in my correspondence our BVAA membership application. Perhaps you know others who would benefit from joining us as family and friends of BVA.

The annual convention will be in Jacksonville, Florida, this year in July. The details are not finalized as of this letter so stay tuned. It would be absolutely amazing if the Auxiliary could achieve a record-breaking turnout!

Lastly, we are still in need of forming a Budget/Finance Committee, Scholarship Committee, and Raffle Committee. If you’d like to help in any of these areas, please let me know. Feel free to email, call, or text me anytime.

With warmest regards,
Robert Murphy
President, Blinded Veterans
Association Auxiliary
rjmurphyfamily@gmail.com
785-564-2526
https://www.nbvaaux.org
Veterans Service Program Update
by Duayne Driscoll

We often hear this from a potential client: “I’m already rated 100 percent and cannot go any higher.”

In many cases that may be correct, but not for the blinded veteran. There are at least nine rates of compensation that exceed a total rating, known as Special Monthly Compensation (SMC).

There are many ways to qualify for this type of SMC based on loss of limb and other serious service-connected disabilities, including blindness. The basic rate of compensation for a single veteran with a total evaluation and no dependents is $3737.85 per month. A blinded veteran with service-connected visual acuity of 5/200 or worse in both eyes also receives a total 100 percent rating for the visual impairment, plus SMC at the L rate for a total of $4,651.06 per month. See 38 USC § 1114.

For the veteran who has service-connected vision loss with visual acuity of 5/200 or worse in one eye and Light Perception Only (LPO) in the other eye, the SMC rate increases to the L1/2 rate, which pays $4,891.50 monthly. When there is no vision left with NLP in both eyes, or enucleation of both eyes, the SMC rate increases to N, or $5,839.08 monthly.

Believe it or not, that was the easy part of understanding SMC for the blinded claimant, and it gets more complicated from there. For any of the SMC levels mentioned above, a half-step may be added if there is another disability, not related to the blindness and rated 50 percent or more, and a full step may be allowed for a separate total rating. For example, the veteran receiving SMC at the N rate for NLP in both eyes who also has a separate 50 percent rating for PTSD will be elevated to the N1/2 rate, or one half-step. If the PTSD is rated 100 percent, the SMC increases to O in this instance, one full step.

The SMC may also be increased if there are other co-morbid service-connected disabilities, such as loss of limb or deafness. A blinded veteran with SMC at the N rate who also has service connection established for hearing loss with at least a 30 percent evaluation will receive the O rate, and this claimant now qualifies for Special Aid and Attendance, again shown on the form prescribed by the Secretary, which pays the R1 rate of $9326.07. A veteran

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receiving SMC at the R1 rate who demonstrates the need for daily in-home professional health care may be elevated to the R2 rate, which pays $10,697.23 per month. This by no means covers all possible scenarios but, as you can see, there are many rates of compensation exceeding 100 percent. For a review of your SMC, please contact the VSP.

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A New Focus in Support of the BVA Community

By Meredith Buono-DaGrossa

Since the last Bulletin, the Development team has been focusing on developing new corporate partner packages and exciting ways that donors can support the BVA community. Corporate contributions and individual donors remain an integral part of the Blinded Veterans Association and our mission of serving our blind and low vision veterans. Below are some initiatives that we have been focusing on.

Become a BVA Visionary

BVA Visionaries are a special team of loyal and dedicated supporters who make recurring monthly donations to help the organization carry out its mission. To become a BVA Visionary, go to https://bva.org/support/ways-to-give/become-visionary/ and choose the amount that you would like to donate per month. Stay tuned for more news about the new BVA Visionary incentive program.

Social Media Fundraising

Facebook makes it easy to set up fundraising events in honor of your birthday, a memorial gift, or a special occasion in just a few simple steps. Visit Facebook to create a fundraiser and login with your credentials. Select the Blinded Veterans Association, set a monetary goal, choose an end date that works for you, and give your fundraiser a title. Celebrate your special day knowing you made a difference for BVA!
Donate Your Car Today and Help BVA!

The Blinded Veterans Association is a listed non-profit with https://careasy.org, a 501(c)3 organization that makes it simple for you to donate your vehicle. They provide free and convenient pick-up and strive to accept any vehicle—cars, trucks, motorcycles, RVs, boats, airplanes, heavy equipment, farm machinery, wheelchairs, and most other motorized vehicles—in all 50 states, running or not. To donate your vehicle, visit https://careasy.org or call 855-500-RIDE and choose the Blinded Veterans Association as the recipient of the donation.

Explore the New Online BVA Store

BVA is working with a new vendor, The Supply Room, on expanding items in the store. A portion of each sale is donated back to the Association. If you require assistance when placing your order, you may contact the company directly on 800-458-5180. To check on item availability in the BVA Store, visit https://www.supplyroom.com/bva/.

Share a Donation in Memory of a Loved One

Honor a loved one’s legacy by making a gift in their memory and supporting blind and low vision veterans. As an expression of sympathy in lieu of flowers, please share a donation on https://bva.org/support/ways-to-give/. Select Memorial/Tribute Gifts from the drop-down menu and click on Memorial/Tribute Details at the top of the page to add your message. If you prefer to send a check, please make it payable to the Blinded Veterans Association and send it to PO Box 90770, Washington, DC 20090 with memorial donation information in the memo line.

Planned Giving

Plan a gift to make a long-term impact on the BVA community. The Blinded Veterans Association offers our supporters a variety of ways to consider planning their gifts. By choosing the right gift, you can benefit BVA and fulfill your own long-term financial goals. For more information, visit BVA.org.

Did You Know?

- The first issue of the BVA Bulletin, begun as a monthly publication, was dated April 15, 1946, a little more than a year after the Association’s founding. For a short time thereafter, each issue began with an editorial on its first page outlining the challenges and successes of the newly formed BVA. In the July 25 issue, Editor-in-Chief/Executive Director Lloyd Greenwood described some of the “growing pains” of an organization like no other. “There is no other group from which to learn a lesson, and it appears that BVA will have to move forward and find the way to serve its purpose most effectively by depending only on the sincere interest and fine ideals of its officers and membership,” he wrote. “It is unfortunate that money should have to be considered when we have only an unselfish desire to help each other.”
Chaplain’s Corner
by Kennith Harvey

God’s Stories Are You and Me

There are more stories to be told about us as members of the Blinded Veterans Association. Our personal stories come from our own experiences that often revolve around spiritual healing. They center on our ability to make the necessary adjustments in life as we face the challenges that God allows to be placed in our path, day in and day out. Yours and mine are the stories of faith and perseverance.

Although most BVA members are in darkness, they see and hear with their hearts, often being spared no pain as daily lives become complex and difficult.

Bear with me as I mention a few names: BVA Regional Group Chaplain Orlando Bembry, Chaplain Jay McLeod, Chaplain Rosa Johnson, Chaplain Corine Stanley, Chaplain Sam Smith, Chaplain David Saylor, and Ms. Elizabeth Holmes. These names represent a few of our models of spiritual voices of reason! They are an example of God’s stories. These stories motivate our will and desire to choose paths of service within our numerous communities.

God, of course, is known to be the greatest entity in existence. As our Creator, Sustainer, and Master of the universe, He is the cause of all things. Those who serve Him, such as those mentioned above, are a model of His voice of reason.

My role as the National Chaplain offers me observations of the BVA membership’s genuine desire to seed the spiritual growth that eventually germinates and blossoms.

The regional group chaplains have that same opportunity. These observations motivate us to become the best spiritual ambassadors we can be, complementing the professional Ambassador Program that so many of our members have also embraced.

The efforts of our regional group chaplains are a doubling of the service on behalf of BVA, and the chaplains are on the move behind the scenes to serve effectively in assisting their fellow members with their spiritual needs and provide support to their leaders. All that is unseen and unheard always comes to light and is heard. We will soon see and hear this seeding effort truly sprout.

Our existing regional group chaplains hope to speak in meetings of their regional groups and add to their own spiritual growth and that of their members. An opportunity as such was recently afforded to me by Director of District 1 Claudia Baldwin and my own regional group president, Michaun Harrison, both members of the BVA Women Veterans Group. That opportunity added to my own spiritual growth as your National Chaplain, and I cannot thank the group enough for the invitation.

Now that many details of the 79th National Convention have been announced, we affirm our commitment to make the chaplaincy program visible and viable in serving all in attendance in Jacksonville. The program, both nationally and locally, is our gateway to sharing God’s stories, which are, in essence, our stories!
Suggestions for Caregivers of Blinded Veterans

When my wife, Janette, and I were skiing in West Virginia, at Beckley I think it was, we skied this one slope so easily that we decided to ski it again. This time, at the top, Janette recognized the black diamond symbol for “steep.” When she saw this, she freaked out, flipping and sliding on her back head-first down the slope, which was fortunately not too far down.

Perception Determines Reality

Here are 20 suggestions, not rules, for caregivers of blinded veterans in situations in which perceptions can change reality. These suggestions are based on 12 years of experience from the perspective of both a blinded veteran and a caregiver, preceded by experience as a licensed psychologist and psychiatric nurse with some 100,000 hours of experience in clinical listening. No guarantees, however, and use these at your own risk!

1. When blinded veterans are passengers in the car in which you are driving, be aware that all the things to which you call their attention along the roadside are in fact new reminders of their blindness.

2. When handing them silverware, please send it to them with the handle first.

3. Do not begin statements with: “How many times…” or “How often have I…” as you remind them of your ever remarkable patience.

4. Carefully learn and respect the limits of not only their visibility but also their mobility.

5. Allow them to do what they believe they can. For example, just because they broke one glass does not mean they should not be allowed to handle any more glasses.

6. Be aware of your tendency to micromanage them.

7. You are not responsible for their feelings. They are not responsible for your feelings either.

8. Stop expecting them to behave like “normal” when neither of you are normal.

9. Be aware that even the world designed for disabled veterans is seldom designed for blinded veterans.

10. You are not responsible for their happiness.

11. Recognize that we humans are universally and inevitably flawed, ready to blame and find fault everywhere. We are often blind to this fault or ready to excuse it.

12. Check out places where you can find inspiring stories and podcasts such as “Grace, Grit, and Hope.”

13. Help them keep track of and manage things but be aware of your tendency to do for them what they can do for themselves.

14. How you handle feelings is the critical issue. Do not pressure your blinded veteran to talk. Be aware of your tendency to judge their feelings as wrong because they do not match your own.

15. Family drama and conflict are everywhere. Become aware of our natural tendency to hold grudges. Know that grudge holding is always self-justified.
16. When driving with blinded veterans as passengers, skip the comments and possible rants about others’ poor driving behavior. They cannot agree because they cannot see. Their main concern is to arrive safely. Further, your own rant may keep you from seeing the next close call in front of you.

17. Stop being disappointed when they do not measure up to your expectations.

18. Become more aware of our tendency to talk over others, not allowing them to finish their statement.

19. Before leaping to a negative conclusion about something your veteran said, start asking first, “What did you mean by that?”

20. Caregivers need their own support system. Make sure you have one.

Of Note

Burial Eligibility in the 21st Century

On September 1, 1973, VA became steward of the 112-year-old National Cemetery System, the forerunner of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). Today, NCA (www.cem.va.gov) manages 155 national cemeteries in the United States and provides grant funding to 122 state, territory, and tribal veterans cemeteries. More than 4.1 million veterans of every conflict—from the Revolutionary War to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—are honored by burial in these cemeteries.

NCA has assisted millions of veterans and their families in scheduling and arranging for burial at national cemeteries for themselves and their spouses. In 2016, NCA developed a Pre-Need Eligibility Application to assist families with burial planning. No longer do veterans or spouses need to wait until the time of death to find out if they are eligible for burial in a national cemetery or for memorial benefits such as a headstone, flat marker, or bronze medallion for use in private cemeteries.

In FY 2023, 55,374 Pre-Need applications were approved. There were 139,360 interments in national cemeteries and 33,556 headstones and markers provided for burial in private cemeteries. Pre-Need applications require the veteran’s Social Security Number, date/place of birth, and military status and service history such as service dates, discharge character, and rank information commonly found on the DD214 or other separation documents. If you do not have discharge documents, NCA staff will help obtain the information needed to determine eligibility. Applicants can apply online at www.va.gov/burials-memorials/pre-need-eligibility/, via mail or fax using www.va.gov/find-forms/about-form-40-10007, or simply search for “NCA Pre Need” on the internet.
If you have questions about future burial needs for yourself or a living dependent of a veteran, or if you need assistance in applying, please call 800-535-1117 and press 4. NCA’s Scheduling Office is open Monday through Friday, 8:00am to 7:30pm Eastern Time, and Saturday 9:00am to 5:30pm except Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s Day. Telecommunications Relay Services or TTY are available at 711.

**Update Contact Info Via BVA Website**

BVA National Headquarters receives a substantial amount of return mail from the U.S. Postal Service, primarily from mailings of the print version of the quarterly *Bulletin*. The database also contains outdated telephone numbers that are often difficult to correct. BVA members can now update their address and other contact information via BVA.org.

The process is a simple one, accomplished on a webpage containing fillable fields in which the updated information can be typed. Format preferences for *The Bulletin* can also be updated on the same page with an opportunity to check any or all preferred options. To go directly to the page to make updates, visit [https://bva.org/membership/update-member-record/](https://bva.org/membership/update-member-record/).

**Safe Transfer Tip Sheet: Useful Advice for Caregivers**

VA has developed and released a resource sheet to empower caregivers with practical, safe advice and best practices in conducting a challenging transfer of a veteran from one place to another, especially when using equipment such as a walker or wheelchair. The guide includes methods for movement, important caregiver mechanics, and frequently forgotten reminders such as wearing nonslip shoes or socks.

To access the document, visit [https://caregiver.va.gov/CAREGIVER/support/docs/docs2024/Caregiver-Resource_Home_Safety_Tip_Sheet-Final_v2.pdf](https://caregiver.va.gov/CAREGIVER/support/docs/docs2024/Caregiver-Resource_Home_Safety_Tip_Sheet-Final_v2.pdf). For more information on available VA resources for safe transfers, consult your VA health provider for referrals to physical and occupational therapy. To learn more about the VA Caregiver Support Program in general, visit [https://www.caregiver.va.gov/](https://www.caregiver.va.gov/).

**VA Health Care Sees Monumental Expansion**

All veterans exposed to toxins and other hazards during military service, at home or abroad, became eligible for VA health care beginning March 5. The announcement on February 26, at the direction of President Joe Biden, revealed the expansion of health care to millions of additional veterans eight years earlier than written into law by eliminating the phased-in approach called for by the PACT Act.

The expansion includes veterans who served in the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan, or any other combat zone after 9/11.

In Remembrance

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

Arkansas R.G.
   Charles Hurl
   Gregory James

Carolina R.G.
   Milton Ackerman
   Jack Dalton
   Carl Tuttle

Florida R.G.
   Robert “Mike” Creech
   Robert Vlugt

Georgia R.G.
   Dick J. Bryant
   Floyd Everett
   Herschel Harris

Illinois R.G.
   James Dankowski
   Lloyd Heidelberg

Louisiana/Mississippi R.G.
   Earl Forstall, Sr.
   Manley Holbrook

Mid-Atlantic R.G.
   Robert Ellsweig
   Joseph Scott
   Ruth Wallace
   John Williams

New Hampshire R.G.
   Gary Bulger

New York R.G.
   Harlan Dillon

Ohio R.G.
   John Slater

Pennsylvania R.G.
   James J. Quilter, Jr.

R.I. and Southeast
   Milton Ackerman
   Jack Dalton

Rocky Mountain R.G.
   Francis Lovett

Tennessee R.G.
   James Brown
   Clifford Davis
   Junior Farley
   William Weddle

At-Large BVA Member, No Regional Group

Affiliation
   Donald Brandenburg (Goshen, Ohio)
   Lonnie Castle (Berea, Kentucky)
   Jerry Nudelman (Portland, Oregon)
   Edward Pike (Neon, Kentucky)
   Leonard Sperrazza (Zephyr, Texas)

In Remembrance

A capacity crowd in Arlington National Cemetery’s Memorial Amphitheater stands at attention and in silence as BVA flagbearers Ruth Wallace and Lawrence Harrison, hidden from view themselves, retire the U.S. and BVA flags from the Veterans Day 2023 observance. Photo courtesy of Celeste Soya Libbin.
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BV A’s weekly electronic newsletter, BVA Happenings, initiated the “Ambassadog Scoop Series” with the start of the New Year. The series features guide dogs that have become significant in the lives of Association members and their families. The dogs are temporarily humanized for purposes of the series as they offer BVA news, tips, and guidance from their perspective.

First up in the series in January was guide dog Donald of Fort Myers, Florida (Teresa Galgano). Otavio “Tavi” of Clayton, North Carolina (Yoneka Trent), was featured in February and pictured above. Kent of Warren, Rhode Island (Rob Sanchas), was the Ambassadog for March.

If you are a BVA member and interested in having your dog participate in the Ambassadog Scoop Series, scheduled to run at least throughout 2024, please send a message via email with your contact information and a brief introduction of your dog to bva@bva.org.