

The Bulletin

Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans



Winter 2026



BVA Presents Annual Congressional Testimony

March 3, 2026



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Cover Photos: On March 3, BVA National Executive Director Lea Rowe presented the Association's current legislative priorities to a joint session of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans Affairs. A summary of the Capitol Hill event, a weblink to the accompanying written testimony BVA submitted to Congress, and a special report on the recently revitalized BVA Care Review Partnership are all part of this issue of **The Bulletin**. See page 4 for the details and descriptions of the cover photos.

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President's Page

by Wade Davis

We Are Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans

At the heart of the Blinded Veterans Association there is a simple but powerful truth: **We are Blinded Veterans helping Blinded Veterans.**

That statement is more than a slogan. It is our mission. It is our strength. It is our promise to one another.

With new staff members joining us at BVA National Headquarters and a Board of Directors committed to moving the Association forward with purpose and determination, we believe that 2026 will be a year of growth, unity, and renewed energy. Progress, however, does not happen by leadership alone. It happens because of you.

You, the membership, are what drives this organization.

BVA has always been strongest when its members are actively engaged. When we show up. When we participate. When we support one another. This year, we encourage every member to become more involved than ever before.

Support your local regional group. Attend meetings. Reach out to members who may feel isolated. Share your experiences and listen to others. Our strength lies in connection.

Get involved with Team BVA Interest Groups. These groups provide opportunities to build friendships, pursue hobbies, stay active, and connect utilizing shared interests. Exciting new interest groups will be added this year, creating additional ways for members to find purpose, belonging, and community.

Every call you make.

Every meeting you attend.

Every new member you welcome.

Every encouraging word you offer.

It all matters.

BVA is not just an organization – it is a family. And families thrive when everyone participates.

As we step into 2026, I challenge each of you to begin every day determined to make a difference for BVA. Make the choice daily to show up — not just physically, but mentally and emotionally.

Start each day with intention and remember the following:

- **Be strong** – Your resilience is a testament to your service and your character.
- **Be confident** – You have overcome challenges that many cannot imagine. Carry that strength forward.
- **Be encouraged** – You are not alone. Your fellow veterans stand beside you.
- **Amaze yourself** – Set goals. Try something new. Take on a leadership role. Discover what you can achieve with the talents and abilities you have.

The future of BVA does not rest in a building. It does not rest solely with leadership. It rests in the collective spirit of its members, veterans who have already demonstrated courage, sacrifice, and determination in many other ways.

We are not defined by vision loss but by service, resilience, and commitment to one another.

Calendar Year 2026 can be a great year for the Blinded Veterans Association – if we choose to make it one. Together, let us move forward with unity, energy, and purpose.

Because we are, and always will be,
Blinded Veterans helping Blinded Veterans.

Did You Know?

- The BVA 53rd National Convention (1998) at the Wyndham Northwest Chicago Hotel was part of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Hines Blind Rehabilitation Center (BRC), which opened on July 4, 1948. The BRC hosted a picnic for convention attendees at the Blind Center on August 13, 1998. Several former trainees of the BRC, including some of its earliest, toured the renovated facility and became reacquainted with the staff. That evening back at the hotel, the BRC also hosted 450 people at a banquet at which then VA Secretary Togo West was the keynote speaker. West recounted the many pioneering achievements of the Hines program, lauding BVA for its role in the establishment of the Hines program and its later expansion to several additional cities throughout the country, including San Juan, Puerto Rico. Other speakers included BVA Executive Director Tom Miller, Russell Williams (first Hines Chief), and Don Garner (then VA Director of Blind Rehabilitation Service). Following the dinner, the BVA Illinois Regional Group hosted a dance.

Cover Photos:

Upper Left: BVA National Executive Director Lea Rowe and National President Wade Davis following March 3 Congressional hearing in Senate Dirksen Building.

Lower Left: With the wooden rendition of the United States Senate Seal as a backdrop, BVA National Headquarters staff pose with National President Wade Davis following BVA's 2026 Congressional testimony. Left to right, Michaun Harrison, Domonique Lawless, Lea Rowe, Wade Davis, and Duayne Driscoll.

Lower Right: Flanked by representatives of other Veterans Service Organizations, Lea Rowe voices the current needs and concerns of blind and low vision veterans nationwide before a joint session of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees.



Executive Director's Message

by Lea Rowe

It is a profound honor to address you as your National Executive Director. Taking on this leadership role is more than a professional milestone; it is a personal commitment for me to every blinded veteran who has navigated the challenges of sight loss with courage and resilience. As we look at what lies on the horizon, my primary goal is to ensure that BVA remains the premier beacon of support, advocacy, and fellowship for our community. We are entering a season of intentional growth and structural renewal, and I am eager to share how we are laying the groundwork for a more vibrant, responsive organization.

To better serve our mission, I am thrilled to announce two pivotal leadership updates at the national level. These roles were filled with one specific goal in mind: impact. We have officially brought on a National Program Director and filled our National Membership Coordinator position. The National Program Director is tasked with a vital portfolio that centers on our Ambassador Program, education, and the expansion of our interest groups. By modernizing these programs, we are ensuring that our outreach is consistent and that our educational resources provide the knowledge necessary for self-advocacy. Simultaneously, the filling of our National Membership Coordinator role allows us to reinvest in our core, which is our people. This position is dedicated to supporting our regional groups and reaching out to the members of our community who may have felt disconnected, ensuring that every veteran

feels the true value of their membership from Day One.

As we navigate this transition, our strategy is built upon the pillars of education, community, and transparency. We are expanding our webinars and looking toward a future project to update our website to ensure that our digital resources are as accessible as possible. However, knowledge alone is not enough; it must be supported by a strong sense of community. BVA is a family, and we are focusing our efforts on supporting our regional groups to ensure that fellowship is a lived experience for every member. Furthermore, you deserve to know how your organization is run. I am committed to total transparency regarding our finances, our goals, and our challenges, fostering a culture of trust between national leadership and our members.

Finally, we are sharpening our focus on interest groups and recruitment to ensure our future. We recognize that our members are not simply a cluster that forms a monolith. By fostering specific groups, ranging from technology enthusiasts to outdoor adaptive sports, we allow veterans to connect over shared passions. This creates deeper bonds and a more engaging experience. To stay vibrant, we must also reach the next generation of blinded veterans. We are launching targeted outreach initiatives to ensure that those transitioning out of service today know that BVA is their lifelong home. My door is always open, and I look forward to building this future alongside you. Together, we aren't just adjusting to change but defining the future of veteran service.



A New Chapter in BVA Programming: Innovation, Inclusion, Impact

by Lea Rowe

The future of the Blinded Veterans Association is rooted in our ability to evolve alongside the needs of our members, and I am thrilled to share the transformative changes coming to our national programming. Under the dedicated leadership of our National Program Director, we are launching a revitalized approach designed to foster deeper connections, provide modern resources, and expand the ways we support one another.

A key component of this role includes the management and oversight of our Ambassador Program. We are equipping our Ambassadors with the structured support and professional tools necessary to serve as a consistent, powerful frontline for outreach. This ensures that every blinded veteran, regardless of their location, is met with the advocacy and fellowship that define BVA.

In addition to managing our outreach efforts, we are placing a significant focus on education through the creation of new training materials and instructional videos. We recognize that accessible, high-quality information is vital for independence. Our goal is to build a robust library of resources that members can access at any time, covering everything from navigating new adaptive technologies to mastering daily life skills. These multimedia tools are designed to empower you in your journey, providing practical guidance that is both easy to follow and relevant to the unique challenges of sight loss. By embracing these new

formats, we are ensuring that BVA remains a modern, forward-thinking resource for veterans of all generations.

Perhaps the most exciting development in our programming is the expansion of our BVA Interest Groups. We know that the lives of our members are defined by their passions and skills, not just their loss of sight. To celebrate this, we are launching groups focused on a wide array of interests, including grilling, cooking, and creative outlets like art and music. We also recognize the importance of emotional health and family dynamics, which is why we are introducing dedicated spaces for caregiver support, grieving support, and the ongoing process of adjusting to vision loss. These groups are more than just hobbies but vital communities where members can share “hacks” for daily living, find solace in shared experiences, and build lifelong friendships.

For this vision to truly succeed, we need your direct input. It is vital to take a moment to fill out the Team BVA Interest Form. This form is your primary tool for telling us which areas of programming are most important to you and where you would like to see the organization focus its energy. Whether you are interested in participating in a new group or simply want to stay informed about upcoming workshops, your feedback is the compass that will guide our programming calendar for the coming year. Together, we are building a BVA that is more inclusive, more active, and more connected than ever before.

Sensitivity Training Offers Huge Dividends

by Tracy Ferro

As members of BVA, we probably say thank you to many throughout the course of the day. It is much more heartfelt when those offers of thanks are for recognizing our vision issues and working with us in a respectful and caring manner. When BVA plans the conventions, including offsite visits to museums, shows, or other types of events, we provide sensitivity training beforehand so that we are treated with respect and dignity.

We have all also experienced what it is like to be told to “Go over there” or feel the pain of hearing “Come over here,” or “it’s over there,” or “sign this.” It’s very frustrating and stressful. We become especially annoyed when we are treated like this in locations that have contact and work with us all the time, places like our doctors’ offices, pharmacies, or stores if we live in a smaller town or city. Of course, we tolerate and understand this much more in situations where people with whom we interact do not often work with the blind and low vision.

We all also recognize how nice it is to feel the respect granted us when we interact with somebody who recognizes our visual issues and offers an arm to guide us instead of grabbing and pulling us, or automatically reads a form for us, or who offers assistance to sign, or lets us know they are there and places a plate full of food in front of us, or chooses to divert from normal decorum by placing our drinks in an area that is not in the “knock it over” zone! We cannot overemphasize how much we appreciate this sensitivity.

We all know also what it is like to receive a heartfelt thanks for a job well done, especially



Tracy Ferro thanks Princess Cruise Line Guest Services Representative Francesca Pilgrim for a job well done.

when we can recognize the training that took place and the desire to retain and practice that training. While on a recent trip on Princess Cruise Lines, it was obvious that sensitivity training had taken place with those serving me, but I wasn’t sure if it was specifically on the one ship, the result of a family member being blind, or perhaps future career plans. When I asked, I was surprised to learn that sensitivity training is mandatory for all crew members when they join the crew of a new ship. Not only do they receive the training, but they also use it. The dignity and respect practiced by this corporation should be something we experience all day every day in every interaction and every encounter.

It boils down to a simple premise: Many organizations and government entities mandate sensitivity training, but too often

they do not follow through. When they do and when we are part of that follow-through, please offer them a heartfelt thanks and let them know how much it means to be treated respectfully and with the dignity you deserve. Speak with them and let them know your appreciation for their willingness to implement what they have learned. Share with their leadership the impression they

have made so that they can be recognized accordingly.

Too often, too many are too concerned with the bottom line and forget the people they rely on for that bottom line. Let those who serve you know your impressions, offering them their due respect and thanks. If we do this meaningfully, loyalty and respect will grow in both directions.

BVA Care Review Partnership Restarts, VISOR Program Inspections Launch

by Richard Lane

BVA has resumed its Veterans Care Review activities, beginning with focused inspections of the Visual Impairment Outpatient Rehabilitation (VISOR) clinics that serve blind and low vision veterans across the country. These site visits mark a renewed phase of collaboration between BVA and VA to evaluate and strengthen the Continuum of Care for veterans with visual impairment. The reviews are designed to assess clinical services, rehabilitation curricula, facility readiness, and the lived experience of veterans who rely on these programs.

Why VISOR Inspections Matter

VISOR clinics are a critical access point in VA's blind and visual impairment rehabilitation continuum. They provide outpatient services that help veterans maintain independence, manage low-vision conditions, and transition to more intensive rehabilitation when needed. Inspecting VISOR programs gives reviewers a window into how effectively

VA is delivering interdisciplinary care outside the inpatient Blind Rehabilitation Centers (BRCs), including orientation and mobility training, low vision therapy, assistive technology access, and coordination with Visual Impairment Services Team (VIST) Coordinators. Evaluating these elements helps ensure that veterans receive consistent, high-quality services regardless of whether they enter care through outpatient clinics or inpatient programs.

What the Care Review Partnership Evaluates

BVA's Veterans Care Review is structured to examine the full curriculum of blind rehabilitation services over several days at each site. Review teams meet separately with staff and veterans, observe clinical and training sessions, and review program components such as optometry and ophthalmology services, low vision clinics, computer access training, manual skills,

recreation therapy, social work, psychology, nursing, diabetic education, and pharmacy. The reviewers also hold sessions with VIST Coordinators to assess referral pathways and case management practices. The goal is to not only identify gaps but to share best practices and actionable recommendations with facility leadership and the VA Central Office to improve outcomes for veterans.

Early Findings and Common Themes

Although each VISOR and BRC has unique strengths and challenges, past reviews and the initial rounds of resumed inspections have repeatedly brought to the surface a handful of recurring themes:

- **Staffing and training needs** — Many programs benefit from additional specialized staff or targeted training in assistive technologies and low vision rehabilitation techniques. BVA reviews, historically, have helped secure funding and staffing adjustments where shortages were identified.
- **Equipment and accessibility** — Adequate training equipment, adaptive devices, and accessible clinic layouts are essential for effective rehabilitation. Reviews often lead to procurement of new tools or facility modifications.
- **Care coordination** — Seamless transitions between VIST, VISOR, and BRC services are crucial. Reviews examine referral tracking, wait times, and how veterans' preferences are honored when scheduling BRC admissions. VA's Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Directive on blind and visual impairment rehabilitation emphasizes these continuity elements.
- **Veteran engagement** — Direct conversations with veterans reveal

how services translate into daily life improvements. Feedback from veterans often drives practical, veteran-centered changes in programming and scheduling.

How Reviews Result in Improvements

BVA's Care Review Partnership is explicitly collaborative: reviewers present findings to local staff and facility leadership, then deliver comprehensive reports with observations and recommendations to the BRC or VISOR Director, VA Central Office, and BVA leadership.

Historically, these reviews have led to measurable improvements, such as additional staffing at BRCs and VISORs, acquisition of new training equipment, and building upgrades to improve safety and accessibility. The process is designed to be constructive, identifying opportunities for improvement while amplifying successful practices that can be replicated elsewhere.

The Inspection Process: What Veterans and Staff Can Expect

When a review team arrives at a VISOR clinic, the visit typically unfolds over several days and includes:

- **Orientation meetings** with facility leadership to outline scope and objectives.
- **Staff interviews** across disciplines to understand workflows, training, and resource constraints.
- **Veteran focus sessions** where veterans can share experiences, concerns, and suggestions.
- **Clinical observations** of therapy sessions, low vision assessments, and assistive technology training.
- **Documentation review** to evaluate referral tracking, wait times, and adherence to VA policy.

- **Feedback sessions** where preliminary findings and immediate concerns are discussed with staff.

This transparent approach helps ensure that recommendations are grounded in the realities of daily operations and that staff have an opportunity to respond and plan for implementation.

Policy Context and Alignment with VA Directives

The inspections align with VA’s VHA Directive on the Blind and Visual Impairment Rehabilitation Continuum of Care, which outlines responsibilities for ensuring comprehensive, interdisciplinary services across VIST, VISOR, and BRC settings. That directive emphasizes tracking referrals, honoring veterans’ site and admission preferences, and maintaining consistent standards across the continuum—areas that BVA reviews explicitly evaluate. By aligning review criteria with VA policy, the Care Review Partnership helps translate high-level directives into practical, site-level improvements.

Measuring Success: Outcomes and Accountability

Success from these reviews is measured in several ways:

- **Implementation of recommendations** — Facilities are expected to respond to comprehensive reports with action plans. Follow-up communication and subsequent reviews track progress.
- **Improved veteran outcomes** — Metrics such as reduced wait times for BRC admission, increased access to assistive technology, and veteran-reported improvements in independence are key indicators.

- **System-level changes** — When reviews identify systemic issues, they can bring about policy updates, resource allocation, and national training initiatives within VA.

Challenges and Opportunities Ahead

Restarting inspections after any pause presents logistical and strategic challenges. Coordinating multi-day site visits across 13 BRCs and nine VISOR clinics requires careful scheduling, clear communication, and sensitivity to local workloads. The reviews must also adapt to evolving clinical practices and new assistive technologies that change how rehabilitation is delivered. However, these challenges create opportunities: Renewed inspections allow BVA and VA to reassess priorities, incorporate veteran feedback collected during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods, and accelerate adoption of innovations that improve independence and quality of life for blinded veterans.

Voices from the Field

Veterans who have participated in past reviews often describe the process as empowering. Being heard by an independent review team and seeing concrete changes—whether new equipment, added staff, or improved scheduling—reinforces trust in the system. Staff members frequently report that the collaborative nature of the reviews helps them secure administrative buy-in for needed investments and training. These human-centered outcomes are central to the Care Review Partnership’s mission: to ensure that, despite their disabilities, blind and low vision veterans can take their rightful place in the community.

What to Watch Next

As the Care Review Partnership continues its inspections, stakeholders should watch for:

- **Publication of site-specific reports** and facility responses that outline timelines for implementing recommendations.
- **VA policy updates** that reflect systemic issues identified across multiple reviews, particularly around referral tracking and wait-time transparency.
- **Investment in training and equipment** at VISOR clinics, demonstrating a commitment to modernizing outpatient rehabilitation services.

Conclusion

The restart of BVA's Care Review Partnership inspections, beginning with VISOR clinics, represents a meaningful recommitment to oversight, collaboration, and continuous improvement in blind and visual impairment rehabilitation. By combining on-the-ground observations with policy-aligned evaluation criteria, the reviews aim to produce tangible improvements in staffing, equipment, care coordination, and veteran experience. For veterans, staff, and administrators alike, these inspections are an opportunity to translate shared expertise into better outcomes and greater independence for those who have served.

Did You Know?

- Thanks, in large part, to a story in the June 1948 issue of the **BVA Bulletin**, Association members have learned over the years that the symbolism within the BVA emblem, or seal as many also refer to it, reflects deeply the values of the organization's founding and early members. To picture the colored version of the emblem, think of a sculptured disc. The face of the disc is a composite of layered symbols inside a red-bordered circle. The base is formed by white, fluffy clouds. The next layer features a five-pointed star with each point reaching out to the edge of the circle. To the right of the top point is a blue Christian cross. To the left of the point is a blue Jewish Star of David. A red broken bayonet runs vertically, centered on top of the five-pointed star. The top layer of the composite depicts a brown arm reaching from the right and a white arm reaching from the left. In the middle of the emblem, the arms meet in a handshake. Under the hands and the point of the bayonet are the blue upper-case letters B, V, and A. The five-pointed star represented the five branches of the Armed Forces at the time. The hands emerging from the backgrounds of clouds represent blindness. The clasped hands, one white and the other brown, symbolize the unity of races. The broken bayonet symbolizes the service-connected injury that causes blindness. Lastly, the Star of David and the Christian Cross represent the unity of creeds. The initials B, V, and A, of course, stand for Blinded Veterans Association.

One of Those Days

by Tracy Ferro

Do you ever wake up and think to yourself, “UGH! This is gonna be one of those days?” You are not aware of exactly what nature and the entire rest of the world have in store for you, but there is a feeling there. Deep down you just want to get back in bed and give it another day.

Dateline: Bremerhaven, Germany, Autumn 1992

The 606 Air Control squadron was well into the move to a new home base at Bitburg, Germany. Many of us probably remember those locations from back in the old days and, for those who don't, they are located about 400 miles from one another. Also of note is that around that time, the drawdown of U.S. forces in Germany was occurring. We were shutting down locations so fast that many folks were leaving before a reasonable and responsible handoff of equipment could occur.

At Basdahl Complex, halfway between Bremerhaven and Hamburg and about 15 miles north of Lucious Clay Caserne, home of the 2nd Armored Division, Forward, was this little RADAR site, home of the Inspector of the Skies, the 606 Air Control Squadron. We learned suddenly that we had to move. Do not misunderstand—we were not being moved, but had to move ourselves. We were one of those units not known to the Army and not acknowledged by the Air Force. We were told to move, because we were a Mobile Radar unit. “So, get moving” was the instruction.

Thanks be extended to that wonderful little puzzle palace in Arlington, Virginia. You know, the funny, five-sided building filled with generals. Yeah, the very same building

that came up with the missions and took away the troops required to fulfill those missions, in this case leaving an operational unit with minimal support.

Well, we took care of this mission. It took a while. Sunday was a free day. On Monday, we headed south for 400 miles and unloaded the trucks. On Tuesday, we drove back north 400 miles, loaded up the trucks, and planned to do that all over again on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. The following Sunday would be for laundry.

Now that you know the back story, here's the specific mission.

80L361, an M-816 Wrecker: Some 40 thousand pounds of Detroit Iron that grunted, groaned, and would drag anything hooked to it. That day, it had 83K288 cannibalized for all sorts of parts and was now loaded up with tons of equipment, including a shop tug. It was weight seeking a new home. I got into the driver's seat and a Vietnamese dude, Staff Sergeant Steve Sawyer, aka then Supply Toad, jumped into a passenger seat and strapped in for a long ride. If that weren't enough, we would also be lucky enough to have rain forecast for all day! That always makes the trips a little more fun and, for those who don't know or never drove those old military vehicles, the windshields hinged out from the bottom to allow for defense, to let in a little ventilation and, when it rained, to let in a whole lot of water. If you ever see those old trucks with bits of tissues in the corners of the windshields, that's why, and I promise you, those showers sucked!

Now, down in Bremen there is a traffic circle of beautiful old cobblestones, several roads coming into the circle and exiting out, intersecting the main road we were on and the Autobahn that we had to enter. The interesting thing is that as I entered, turning right and then going around to the left, I was fully prepared to go three-quarters of the way around and exit to the right and onto the Autobahn. Well, that little gem hanging on the back, Mr. 83K288, had other plans. It wanted to go around the traffic circle again! Yippee Mom, look at me going around the circle sideways! And, those beautiful old cobblestones, now wet and slick with the rain of the day, willingly obliged. So, there I was, one second happy and getting on the Autobahn and in the next second the back of the wrecker was being dragged back into the circle by that damn truck stuck to the back of us.

What did Steve bring to this little experiment, you ask? A whole lot of screaming, at a very loud volume, all of it in Vietnamese, while everybody else trying to partake in getting to work that day honking their horns like I was doing this on purpose. Not sure what Steve said that morning, but I'm sure it was about doing some fancy driving or something. By the time our heartrate slowed to a semi-normal rhythm, we were about 50 miles down the road. I had burned through a pack of cigarettes, Steve had started smoking, and we had lost five pounds due to sweat. The rest of the day was just as scary, and I never wanted to do that again. Thank goodness we only had three more weeks of moving remaining.

In retrospect, I did walk away with a whole new love of life, and a funny story to pass along, which I have done for many years. Then, one day...

Dateline: Biloxi, Mississippi, 12 February 2026

I went into work at the BRC that day. There, I assist blind and low vision veterans with all sorts of things. Many of our **Bulletin** readers have doubtless met me there. I see every veteran that comes through to ensure that they are well taken care of—and I enjoy it. Part of getting to know my veterans is sometimes telling stories of the old days. On this day, I was handed my sheet with veterans I was to see and on it was, of all people, a “Steve Sawyer”! My first reaction was to ask upstairs if Sawyer was a little Vietnamese dude. “Yup, was the response. Air Force? Yup. Supply bubba? Yup.

No, no way it can really be him! I gotta meet this guy. A little later that day, he is brought to my office and, as only veterans can relate and understand, Steve and I meet again 30 years after we went our separate ways. He is doing well, despite losing his eyesight and now receiving rehabilitation training. He is also dealing with a few other normal and common age-related concerns that life throws our way.

We have all learned in the military to never say good-bye, but rather “See you later!” So, my advice to all BVA members is to keep your ears open because one day you too may have...one of those days!

Around BVA

Lea Rowe Appointed National Executive Director

The Blinded Veterans Association's National Board of Directors has appointed Lea Rowe as the permanent National Executive Director. She has most recently served in the dual role of Interim National Executive Director for the past four months and the National Legislative Director since January 2025. The appointment is effective immediately.

Lea brings 21 years of experience in nonprofit management to the position of Executive Director, including her tenure as Head of Client Services at Lighthouse for the Blind of Fort Worth, Texas, from June 2021 until joining BVA last year. She has also worked as the Business Solutions Manager



Lea Rowe, right, with now National President Wade Davis outside congressional hearing room prior to March 2025 testimony.

and a Special Projects Coordinator for Tarrant County (Texas) Public Health, and as the Executive Director for the Charis Health Center in Mount Juliet, Tennessee.

With a deep passion for serving the blind and low vision community, Lea is focused on and committed to advocating for the needs of blind and low vision veterans. She earned a Bachelor's Degree in Public Health from University of Texas Tyler and graduated this past June with a Master of Science Degree in Low Vision Rehabilitation from Salus University (now the Elkins Park Campus of Drexel University) and with certification as a Low Vision Therapist.

Congress Receives, Hears BVA Legislative Priorities

BVA National Executive Director Lea Rowe presented the Association's annual oral testimony on March 9 before a joint session of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs. The opportunity to testify yearly stems from the BVA Congressional charter approved and granted nearly 68 years ago (1958). Lea was joined at the witness table in a panel arrangement by representatives of the following: Student Veterans of America, Jewish War Veterans, Fleet Reserve Association, Minority Veterans of America, National Association of County Veterans Service Officers, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

Lea addressed VA staffing shortages and pay disparities, final reconciliation of the Veterans Accessibility Advisory Committee Act, expansion of access to and protection of guide dogs, realistic assessments of the needs



Lea Rowe, in the company of other VSO representatives, outlines BVA legislative priorities for the upcoming fiscal year.



Two capacity crowds of veterans assembled in the Dirksen Senate Office Building on March 3, one for the earlier Veterans of Foreign War testimony and the one pictured here for BVA's presentation.



Left to right following House and Senate joint hearing: BVA Executive Director Lea Rowe, Program Director Domonique Lawless (standing), and National President Wade Davis.

of blind and low vision veterans received from caregivers, and provision of adequate funding for the Vision Research Program administered by the Congressionally Directed

Medical Research Program and focused directly on visual dysfunction associated with service-connected eye injuries.

BVA's printed testimony, a more detailed document than the verbal remarks, was submitted for the Congressional Record. View Lea's oral testimony and/or read the full written testimony at <https://veterans.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=7864>. She is introduced to begin her remarks at 1:50:10 (one hour, 50 minutes, ten seconds) of the video recording.

BVA Welcomes New National Program Director Domonique Lawless

Domonique Lawless joined BVA on March 2 as the organization's new National Program Director. Dominique shares a few thoughts with **The Bulletin** about her new role:

I am excited and honored to join the BVA staff as the new National Program Director. For more than a decade I have worked in the

field of blindness, teaching Orientation and Mobility, Braille, access technology, and the skills of daily living to both children and adults.

For the past three years I've had the opportunity to serve as Program Director for Low Vision and Orientation and Mobility Services at a state agency for the blind where I worked with a team of outstanding O&M instructors, aided consumers and staff in finding the right low vision aids, and worked with optometrists around the state to facilitate low vision exams for individuals who are blind and vision impaired.

As a blind person myself, my lived experiences have shaped my professional path and my passion for supporting others in building independence and opportunity.

While I am not a veteran, many of my immediate family members have served in the military. Their service has given me a deep appreciation for the sacrifices veterans make and has strengthened my passion for working with and advocating alongside the veteran community.

I look forward to getting to know you in the months ahead and to working together to continue strengthening the programs and community that make BVA so impactful.

BVA Welcomes New National Membership Coordinator

Christina Kyle joined BVA on February 23 as the new National Membership Coordinator. Christina shares some brief thoughts about her new role with the following:

Hello, BVA Family! I am truly honored to introduce myself as your new National Membership Coordinator. While I am new to the role, my heart has always been rooted in service, and I am eager to begin this journey alongside all of you.

My Roots: I was born and raised in Houston, Texas—a place that taught me the value of community and tradition. My passion for health and wellness led me to the University of Texas at Tyler, where I earned my Bachelor's Degree in Health Science. Driven to make a broader impact, I later attended Texas A&M University, where I completed my Master of Public Health with a focus on Health Promotion and Community Health Sciences.

Compassion in Action: My professional background is diverse, but my time working in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) was perhaps the most defining. In the NICU, I learned that supporting families during their most vulnerable and critical moments requires more than just clinical skill. It also requires deep compassion and a steady hand. I've also spent years honing my skills in leadership, coordination, and administrative operations. Whether I was managing complex projects or streamlining office systems, my goal has always been to make organizations run more effectively so that they can better serve their people.

The Spirit of Giving Back: Community involvement has always been a pillar of my life. For the past 18 years, I have proudly volunteered with the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. Contributing to an event that celebrates community and giving back has been one of my greatest joys, and it's a spirit I intend to bring to BVA every single day.

My Mission at BVA: I am incredibly excited to blend my public health background and administrative experience with my passion for service. As your National Membership Coordinator, my priority is **you**. I am here to:

- Support our veterans and their families.
- Strengthen the connections between our members across the country.
- Contribute to the growth of an organization that makes a tangible, meaningful difference in the lives of those who served our nation in the military.

I look forward to meeting many of you and working together to ensure that BVA remains a strong, vibrant community for years to come.

Emergence of Spring Paves Way for Gardening Interest Group

Spring 2026 is on the horizon and the change in seasons cannot come too soon for most of us! With spring's welcome arrival, it is finally time to spring into action to make our gardening dreams a reality! According to Interest Group Leader Monique Statham, the fulfillment of these gardening dreams will come through the BVA Gardening Interest Group, which begins meeting via Zoom on Monday, April 13, at 6:00pm Eastern Time.

Monique further describes what those who attend the five Spring Gardening Interest Group sessions can look forward to:

Our group's special project will be creating an intensive garden. It's all about maximizing your space. You will have to plant flowers, vegetables, and herbs that all complement one another in a small container. It will teach us how companion planting is the way to go. We will also discuss some great topics and have awesome guest speakers. However, it will be nothing without you, our members, so please register today and spread the word!

Registration is now open until March 27. The first ten BVA members who register will receive materials for their intensive

BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION
SERVING BLINDED VETERANS SINCE WORLD WAR II

GARDENING INTEREST GROUP

5-WEEK SPRING SERIES

Facilitated by
Monique Statham

Monday
April 13 - May 11, 2026

6:00pm-7:30pm
Eastern Time

gardening projects. To join the Gardening Interest Group, please visit <https://bva.org/programs/team-bva/event-registration-form>. Be sure to complete the form in its entirety, including home address, and specify that you wish to join the Gardening Interest Group and no other for the time being.

The schedule and content for the spring sessions consist of the following:

April 13—Introduction

April 20—Special Project Instructions,
Companion Planting

April 27—Special Guest Speaker

May 4—Natural Remedies

May 11—Speaker, Special Project Results

More great news! Once the spring sessions are finished, the Gardening Interest Group will begin meeting monthly via Zoom.

The first meeting will be June 8 at 6:00pm Eastern Time. The meetings will be scheduled for every second Monday of the month. Additional summer meetings will therefore be held on July 13 and August 10.

Louisiana Golf Course Unveils Braille Flag, Honors BVA Member

Celebrating inclusion and honoring a few local veterans, the Jay & Lionel Hebert Municipal Golf Course in Lafayette, Louisiana, accepted a tactile Braille U.S. Flag from BVA's Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group at a presentation in the course's clubhouse on December 19. The presentation was combined with a recognition ceremony of two veterans from the local community, one of which was Shawntina Gibson, Secretary of the Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group.

Shawntina, who served in the U.S. Navy in 2006 and the Army from 2009 to 2012, shared the stage with Lee Nunley, an Army veteran who served from 1953 to 1958. Both Shawntina and Nunley were formally honored for their military service and presented with a commemorative flag by Reggie Guillory, staff member for U.S. Congressman Cleo Fields (D-LA-6).

The initiative was driven by Chris Arceneaux, Head Golf Professional at the Jay & Lionel Hebert Municipal Golf Course, Chief Executive Officer of Generations Sports Management, and Director of the PGA HOPE Veterans Program of the City of Lafayette.

Arceneaux also donated the custom display that will heretofore house the Braille Flag. As a symbol of inclusion, the Flag is a magnificent bronze and acrylic rendering of the American Flag, complete with raised Braille dots to allow for interpretation and reverence through touch. It will be a permanent fixture at the clubhouse, supporting the facility's expanded mission to host inclusive events for the visually impaired.



Left to right: Honoree Shawntina Gibson, U.S. Congressional Staffer Reggie Guillory, fellow honoree Lee Nunley, and Golf Pro Chris Arceneaux.

“Our nation’s flag has long served as a unifying symbol, but for too long, those who are blind or visually impaired could experience it only through description,” said Vincent Pierre prior to the ceremony. Pierre is the Municipal and Constituent Services Advisor liaison to the Office of the Mayor of Lafayette.

“The placement of this tactile Flag allows all visitors to personally connect with our nation’s most cherished emblem through touch and the universal language of Braille, and we are grateful to BVA for this meaningful gift that will serve our community for generations to come,” Pierre continued.

A press statement prior to the event expressed the Jay & Lionel Hebert Municipal Golf Course’s pride in “taking a tangible step toward creating a welcoming and accessible environment for all veterans and community members.”

Tennessee BVA Ambassador Offers Free Harmonica Lessons

David Jones, BVA member and Ambassador from Ooltewah, Tennessee, has offered to share his passion and ability to play the harmonica with any interested BVA member. The lessons can be conducted via Facetime calls or by telephone. According to David, possessing sight is not a requirement for playing the harmonica, which consists of four basic holes that can produce eight different sounds.

David plays in memory of his father and for his brothers, the latter of whom now shares a musical bond with him that he did not have when growing up. He has also instructed a great-granddaughter and played for his fellow veteran trainees at the Southeastern Blind Rehabilitation Center in Birmingham, Alabama.

A feature in last summer's **VA News** entitled "Veteran Finds Healing with a Harmonica" described David's connection with BVA and his self-taught proficiency with the harmonica that led him to participate in this past year's Creative Arts Festival. He uses music to tell his story of loss but also of connection. To inquire about possible harmonica lessons, call David at (630) 801-1921 or send him a message via email at davidw.jones@hotmail.com. The **VA News** feature is still accessible as well at <https://news.va.gov/141862/veteran-finds-healing-with-a-harmonica/>.

Scholarship Deadline Approaches

The Sue Cantrell scholarships are available to spouses, children, and grandchildren of BVA members to assist them with their higher education tuition. Applicants must be accepted to an accredited institution of higher education or business, secretarial, or vocational training school. The scholarships are awarded based on merit through an application process evaluated by a committee. The scholarships for veterans' dependents are for one year only, but recipients can reapply and receive the award up to four times.

QUANTITY:

Four \$2,500 Scholarships Annually

The deadlines are:

- Applications are due on Thursday, April 30, 2026, at 11:59pm Eastern Time (late applications will not be accepted).
- Internal selections must be made by June 1, 2026.
- Recipients will be contacted by June 15, 2026.

Application and required documents for qualification are:

- A Complete Application
- Incomplete applications will not be accepted. It is the responsibility of the applicant (not BVA) to ensure a completed application.
- Transcripts
 - If applicants have attended an institution of higher education (or several of them), they must submit a transcript of record from each institution.
 - If applicants have not attended an institution of higher education, they must submit a transcript of their high school record.

- If applicants have been to college only one semester, they must submit their high school transcript in addition to college transcript.
- Three Letters of Reference in the current Calendar School Year
 - One letter of academic reference related to academic achievements. This reference must be formalized using letterhead stationery or business stationery from the affiliated organization. Letters of academic reference must be related to the school the applicant is attending or will be attending and must be no later than six months old.
 - Two letters of personal reference in which the authors identify their relationship with applicants.
 - All letters of reference must be typed and signed.
 - Letters must be addressed to the Blinded Veterans Association.
 - Letters of reference used for previous scholarship applications are not accepted.
 - Letters of reference may not come from a family member.
- Merit of Career Goals/Personal Narrative
 - Must be typed.
 - Previous applicants must submit a new statement with each application.
 - Applicants must describe in no more than 300 words their post-education, lifetime, specific career goals, and aspirations (i.e., what they plan to do after completing their education), and outline their plans to pursue them.
- Additional Evidence of Achievement (optional)
 - Applicants may submit other evidence of achievement in the academic and/or the non-academic fields that they believe qualifies them for a scholarship award.
 - Evidence must be corroborated by documentation, (i.e., a copy of certificate documenting the award, a copy of a citation, etc.).

Baskis, Bedwell, Hale Unite To Climb Kilimanjaro Summit

BVA members Steve Baskis, Lonnie Bedwell, and Aaron Hale all qualify as the universe’s cream of the crop when it comes to motivational speaking and high adventure sports such as mountain climbing, skiing, whitewater kayaking, marathon running. Their brute toughness and stamina were on full display the last two weeks of February as they achieved their climb of Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest peak on the African continent. They reached the summit on March 2.

Although the ascent occurred nearly 11 years after it was originally planned, it has now successfully happened and is firmly in the personal history books of each one.

For Steve and Lonnie, they knew in advance what was in store for them prior to the climb, having conquered the peak previously. For Aaron, the reason for his decision to experience what, for him, was still unknown is something only he could begin to explain—and most certainly he will do just that in the weeks and months ahead. For now, his social media followers have a brief message he composed on LinkedIn on March 4, just two days after reaching the summit. A portion of what he expressed is the following:



Steve Baskis, Aaron Hale, and Lonnie Bedwell atop Mount Kilimanjaro.

I'm still trying to wrap my head around it... We stood on top of Kilimanjaro.

215 miles from the coast... and somehow we were standing on the roof of Africa.

You'd think what would be echoing in my head is the altitude. The miles. The moment I questioned every life decision that led me to hiking uphill voluntarily.

But it's not. It's gratitude.

Mountains don't get climbed alone.

Our guides were unreal. Placing our feet when the trail turned to mud... then rock... then snow. When everything narrowed down to one careful step at a time, they were right there.

My teammates? Absolute grinders. There were moments when tanks were empty. Nobody pretended it was easy. We just didn't let each other quit.

The prayers. The messages. The encouragement that was sent across time zones. They were felt out there.

Every person who donated, shared, believed - you were part of this. Truly. Thank you!

Collaborating for the Cause of Vision Research

BVA is at the table, shaping the future of vision research! During the last week of February, the Association collaborated with VisionServe Alliance and a cohort of industry leaders, including the American Printing House for the Blind, the American Council of the Blind, and the Helen Keller National Center. Together, they reviewed



Left to right at NRTC: Ariel Silverman, American Foundation for the Blind; Jason Eckert, VisionServe Alliance; Scott Thornhill, American Council of the Blind; and Lea Rowe.

seven groundbreaking research projects for the National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision (NRTC) at Mississippi State University.

“Over the next five years, these projects will provide critical insights that complement BVA’s mission to serve those with sight loss,” said Lea Rowe. “We look forward to seeing how this data-driven approach will enhance the services and innovations available to our veterans and all individuals living with blindness.”

SCRG President Earns Impressive Art Scholarship

Cheri Owen, Air Force veteran, President of the Southern California Regional Group, and a blind student in the California State University system (Long Beach campus) in the field of Studio Arts, has been awarded the Dale M. Schoettler Scholarship for Visually Impaired Students.

Schoettler was a successful business professional who lost his sight during the last year of his life. Through his financial support stemming from a desire to give visually impaired students a helping hand in achieving their college aspirations, the California State University Foundation created the scholarship that Cheri has earned through her academic performance and personal accomplishments.

“Congratulations on your perseverance and this significant achievement,” Wendy Chavira Garcia told Cheri in the letter informing her of the scholarship. “We are proud and honored that you are part of the California State University system.”

Cheri began her new semester on February 2, working currently with mixed media (wood and ceramics, coupled with printmaking) in her program. She is the first blind student,



Cheri Owen and guide dog Martinez.

and in fact the first student overall, to help the University system develop a post-Bachelor’s Degree program. She now believes that her current situation was “all meant to be” and more than coincidence as Marianne McGrath, Chair of the Art Department in which Cheri is learning and working, taught art at the Texas School for the Blind several years ago.

Cheri is also working on a commission for the Santa Babara Arts Council that involves a 7 X 9-foot mural that she is carving and will attach to wood herself.

The mixed media art Cheri produces is ceramic sculpture, functional wares, and prints. With a penchant for tactile media like ceramics and printmaking, she aspires to share her work with a universe she can no longer see—as a means of touching people emotionally through deep, piercing, poetic phrases, and through the beauty of trees, birds, and the natural world.

Cheri enjoys being in a space for an extended period to become mindful and intimately aware of her creative practice, and to learn about an unfamiliar environment through a touch-centered approach. She allows the environment to percolate into her

work through bark, branches, trees, wind, deer, the warmth of the sun, grass, morning dew, the silence of the evening, and the chirping of birds. She also listens to all of nature's universe as if it were speaking to her directly, always open to feel, taste, hear, and touch.

Two years ago, Cheri was selected to be part of the prestigious Individual Artist Fellowship Program with SVCREATES (Silicon Valley Creates) and the California Arts Council. She has served as both a client and a Board member for Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Catch Recent Compelling Episodes of Visions of BVA

“A Life at Sea and Still Moving Forward: Jim Rush’s Navy Service, Blind Rehab, and 99 Years of Perspective” is the subject of the February episode of BVA’s monthly podcast **Visions of BVA**. The episode became available on February 1.

In this powerful and heartfelt program, host Steve Baskis sits with Jim Rush, a 99-year-old U.S. Navy veteran whose life spans World War II, the Korean conflict, and nearly a century of service, work, and resilience. Jim shares his journey from volunteering for the Navy in 1940, serving as an aerial gunner flying seaplanes along the Florida coast, to later being recalled during the Korean War. Jim recently joined BVA as one of its newest members.

Jim also reflects on life at sea, historic moments he witnessed firsthand, and the realities of military service during pivotal moments in world history. Now attending VA residential blind rehabilitation in Biloxi, Mississippi, Jim shares his feelings about



sight loss, adapting to change, staying active through daily walking, and maintaining independence late in life. The conversation is a remarkable testament to perseverance, perspective, and the strength of our Nation's veterans across generations.

“Autonomous Transit and Accessibility: A Conversation with Gregory Crandell of HOLON US Inc” is the subject of the latest episode. The program went live on March 1.

In this insightful program, Steve Baskis sits with Gregory Crandell, General Manager of HOLON US Inc., to discuss the future of autonomous shuttle transportation and its potential implications for blind and visually impaired riders.

Gregory shares his background in the automotive industry and explains how HOLON's autonomous vehicle is being developed to support first-mile/last-mile transportation—helping people travel from neighborhoods and smaller roads to larger transit routes and transportation hubs. The conversation explores how the vehicle is being designed with accessibility in mind, including input from focus groups involving blind, wheelchair, and hearing-impaired riders.

Steve and Gregory also discuss the importance of consistent audio communication, safety redundancy, and how autonomous transit could expand mobility options for veterans and others who rely on public transportation. This episode offers a look at how emerging transportation technology may help improve independence, confidence, and access for the blind and visually impaired community.

Visions of BVA is a deep dive into the inspiring stories of the organization and its members, accounts of resilience, and the achievements of blind and low vision veterans. Each episode features interviews, discussions on life-changing technology, and a glimpse into the BVA community. The episodes are all available via **Apple Podcasts**, **Spotify**, and **YouTube**.

Listeners and subscribers of **Visions of BVA** are welcome and encouraged to leave their feedback and share their thoughts with Steve Baskis, sbaskis@bva.org, on any aspect of these two episodes or any others he produces.

“Finding the Puck” Details Hockey Journey

Mid-Atlantic Regional Group member Craig Fitzpatrick has published **Finding the Puck: Leadership Lessons from My Journey Through Blind Hockey**. The hard-cover title of this part inspirational memoir, part leadership parable, was released on February 3. A Kindle edition is also available. Both can now be purchased by pre-order.

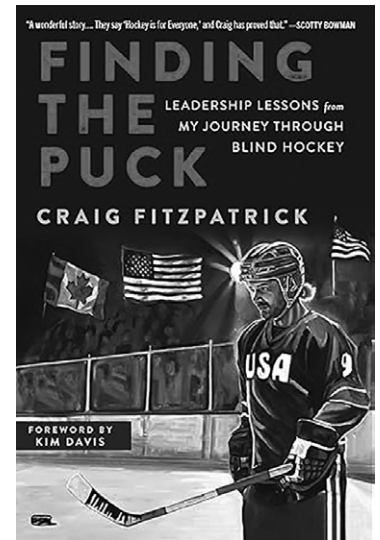
The book traces Craig’s experience of losing his eyesight but then finding himself once again at age 37 when he improbably laced up a pair of skates. The journey he relates, the book’s promotion says, is one of openness, humility, ambition, and advocacy

that has served to make him victorious on the ice as well as in the business world. The personal meaning behind Craig’s membership in the Blinded Veterans Association is also included in the book.

Craig played forward for the U.S. Blind Hockey Team, competing across North America. He has helped found numerous blind hockey teams and has taught more than 300 blind adults and youth how to play the game. He is a longtime Colorado Avalanche fan and trained in Colorado during his competitive hockey career. He and his book were featured on the radio post-game show of the Washington Capitals following their 3-2 overtime win over the Montreal Canadiens on January 13. He was also part of the 2025 NHL Veterans Appreciation Night doubleheader broadcast on TNT on November 11, 2025.

Craig graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy and served five years in the Air Force before being diagnosed with Stargardt disease, leading to his near-complete blindness and 100 percent service-related disability. He is currently the chief innovation officer at Akira Technologies, an AI and cybersecurity technology company in the Nation’s Capital.

Craig earned a Master of Public Administration (Summa Cum Laude) from Saint Louis University. His charitable work focuses on serving as a Senior Technology Fellow at the Center for Advanced Defense Studies, where he guides C4ADS’ technology



commercialization efforts. Learn more about Craig Fitzpatrick and **Finding the Puck**, including how to order the book via Amazon, at <https://www.amazon.ca/Finding-Puck-Leadership-Lessons-Journey/dp/1637279108>.

Louisiana Flag Presentations Strengthen Community Outreach

Readers of **BVA Happenings** in early 2026 may well have concluded that the Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group had taken a winter break from their presentations of Acrylic Braille American Flags to focus on gumbo, jambalaya, or spending cold winter days in the warmth of indoor information fairs. Nothing could be further from the truth! Four flag presentations took place in January and February.

On January 26, regional group treasurer Joe Burns presented a flag to the Marrero Library and one to the Westwego Library, both in small Louisiana cities on the west bank of the Mississippi River across from New Orleans. Joe was the loan representative from BVA since many of the bridges and roads were closed due to icing.

The Marrero Flag was sponsored by the Marrero Lions Club, the second one they had sponsored. The Westwego Flag was sponsored by the **noh3.inc** Red Dress Run. Members of the Jefferson Parish Library Department were in attendance, including Parish Library Director Jessica Styles; her assistant, Selena Muhoberac; Westwego Manager Robert Beard; and several patrons and employees.

As he does always, Joe presented a substantive summary of BVA's early history and offered a description of what the Association does. He then moved on to a Braille Flag explanation, detailing a few



St. Martinville Mayor Jason Willis (center, holding flag); to his immediate left BVA members Van Vandecapelle, Francis Arceneaux, and City Council members; to Mayor's immediate right, Gary Schoelerman and additional Council members.

personal experiences he has had in other presentations.

On February 2, the regional group presented an Acrylic Braille American Flag and Plaque to the St. Martinville, Louisiana, City Council for display in the City Hall Library. St. Martinville attorney Lee Durio happened to be at the group's St. Martin Parish Council presentation in December and decided that he wanted his city to be part of the great Braille Flag project.

On this occasion, BVA member Gary Schoelerman presented to the Council the brief history of BVA, what the organization does for veterans, and the history of the Braille. Joining Gary in attendance were regional group members Francis Arceneaux and Van Vandecapelle. The group addressed questions from the members of the Council about the VA-BVA relationship and collaboration. Council members also asked

questions about the Flag itself. Mayor Jason Willis told us that the Flag would be placed in a prominent location where it could be both seen and touched.

On February 9, Gary and Regional Group Secretary Leigh Mitchell represented the group with a similar presentation to Alexandria, Louisiana, American Legion Post #3. They emphasized the Plaque as a symbol of the sacrifices made by the BVA founders. Outside of the VA Medical Center in Alexandria, the Flag and Plaque were the first to be placed in the Alexandria area.

“The Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group thanks members John Heath and Leigh, both of them who live in the area, for their hard work in getting the Alexandria flag placed,” Gary said. “It will be the first of many!”

BVA Earns 2026 Platinum Seal

BVA has earned a 2026 Candid Platinum Seal of Transparency! The seal indicates that the Blinded Veterans Association shares clear and vitally significant information with the public about our goals, strategies, capabilities, achievements, and progress indicators that highlight the difference BVA

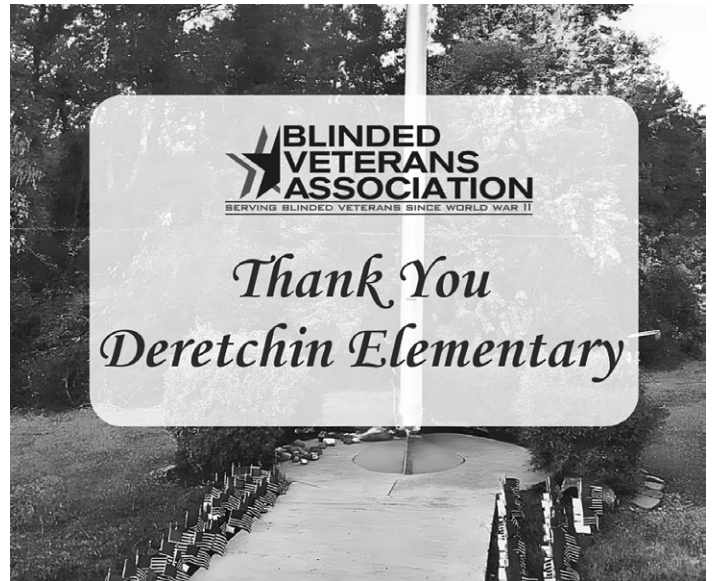


makes for blind and low vision veterans.

BVA values the generosity of all who support our mission to serve as ambassadors and mentors for all veterans and their families coping with sight loss. To view what your donations accomplish, visit <https://app.candid.org/profile/7797106/blinded-veterans-association-53-0214281>.

Deretchin Elementary Raises Funds for BVA

A big thank you to the students and faculty at Deretchin Elementary in The Woodlands,



Texas. The K-6 elementary school held an event this past Veterans Day in honor of the Blinded Veterans Association. The event, which raised more than \$600, brought together all staff and students, offering an opportunity to all to purchase a flag and make a donation to BVA.

“The goal of the event was to raise funds to support BVA’s mission and to honor those who served our country,” said Meredith Buono-DaGrossa. “The dedication and generosity demonstrated by Deretchin Elementary is inspiring and heartwarming and, on behalf of the blind and low vision veterans we serve, thank you for supporting our mission.”



Auxiliary's View

by Robert Murphy

The Blinded Veterans Association Auxiliary (BVAA) is proud to announce the opening of applications for the Renee Feldman

Scholarship, a meaningful opportunity designed to support the educational goals of families of blinded veterans. Each academic year, BVAA awards three scholarships: two in the amount of \$2,000 and one in the amount of \$1,500. Funds are distributed in two installments—fall and spring—directly to the institution in which the student is enrolled.

The scholarship honors the service and sacrifice of blinded veterans by investing in the futures of their families. Eligible applicants must be a spouse or generational child—defined as a child, grandchild, or great-grandchild—of a blinded veteran who is a past or current member of BVA. The program is open to full-time students enrolled in an accredited vocational technical school, community college, college, or university. Students may apply each year of their academic journey and may receive up to four annual scholarship awards.

Applicants are reminded that they are responsible for ensuring that all required materials are submitted to the Scholarship Committee Chairperson by the May 1, 2026 deadline. Required materials include completed application forms, official

transcripts, supporting documents, three letters of reference, and a 300-word essay outlining post-education lifetime plans and career goals. The selection process follows a “best-qualified” standard, with primary emphasis placed on financial need and academic achievement. The personal essay also weighs heavily in the committee’s evaluation, offering applicants an opportunity to share their aspirations and long-term vision.

Candidates are encouraged to complete every form thoroughly. If additional space is needed, applicants should attach separate sheets rather than write on the forms themselves. Those whose veteran family member is deceased must provide documentation verifying their relationship.

The Renee Feldman Scholarship reflects BVAA’s enduring commitment to supporting the families of blinded veterans and helping them achieve educational and professional success. By easing financial burdens and recognizing academic dedication, the Auxiliary continues its mission of service beyond the battlefield—into classrooms, campuses, and communities across the nation.

For application access and additional information, students should visit <https://bva.org/auxiliary/> or contact Scholarship Committee Chairperson Robert Murphy directly at bvaanationalreporter@gmail.com with any questions regarding eligibility or submission requirements.



Veterans Service Program Update

by Scott Quinlan

A Blinded Veteran's Guide to the Auto Allowance

The following public law conveys the recurring auto allowance,

which is allowed every 30 years. It will update in the year 2032, when the vehicle allowance will then occur every 10 years. The following is the terminology found in the U.S. Code book. You can have a look and visualize what governs the recurring auto allowance.

Here is the language:

PUBLIC LAW 117-333—January 5, 2023

SEC. 21. ELIGIBILITY FOR DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

PROVISION OF ADDITIONAL AUTOMOBILE OR OTHER CONVEYANCE.

Section 3903(a) of Title 38, United States Code, is amended (1) in paragraph (1), by striking “paragraph (2)” and inserting “paragraphs (2) and (3)”; and (2) by adding at the end the following new paragraph:

(3) The Secretary may provide or assist in providing an eligible person with an additional automobile or other conveyance under this chapter

(A) if more than 30 years have elapsed since the eligible person most recently received an automobile or other conveyance under this chapter; or

(B) beginning on the day that is 10 years after date of the enactment of the Veterans Auto and Education Improvement Act of 2022, if more than 10 years have elapsed since the eligible person most recently received an automobile or other conveyance under this chapter.

Again, the recurring auto allowance is every 30 years. So, if you have reached your 30-year anniversary, you are again eligible. One caveat: If you acquire your vehicle in 2026, then in 2032 you will have to wait until the year 2036 until your next auto allowance due to the requirement to wait for the ten-year anniversary. As I stated, 2032 is the year in which the new law becomes effective, but you already have received the 30-year grant so you will need to wait an additional ten years for it to become effective.

The following are the eligibility requirements for the auto allowance. You must have a service connection for any one of the following:

- You have loss, or permanent loss of use of one or both feet.
- You have loss, or permanent loss of use of one or both hands.
- You have permanent vision loss of 20/200 in the better eye, or you have a decreased field of vision in the better eye of 20 degrees or less.
- You have suffered a severe burn.
- You have Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS).

If you have the service connection for any of the above items and you wish to apply for the auto allowance, you will need to use

your computer and open **VA.gov** and locate the document section. Next, locate and download form 21-4502, ensuring that it is the latest form. If you have issues with using a computer, you can call the VA Hotline at 1-800-827-1000 and ask the person with whom you are speaking to send Form 21-4502 to you via U.S. Mail.

The next step is crucial. If it is not followed, VA will not accept the form. Please fill out page 1 entirely. This includes signature and date. Not following that instruction will get you denied. The only item on the top of page 2 that will be filled in is your Social Security Number. Please do not try to submit your form yourself as it is quite easy to do something incorrectly! To ensure that the form is properly filled out, please call your BVA National Service Officer (NSO) and ask for the fax number so that the National Service Director can ensure that the form is correct before it is submitted to VA.

After submitting your Form 4502 to VA, you will next receive a certified copy of the form with all the signatures needed to begin the journey to the auto dealership. Upon purchasing your vehicle, you want to ensure

that the vehicle is of equal or greater cost than the grant amount. This will leave nothing on the table as you will not receive any refund if you have not used the entire grant.

Please follow all instructions on the form when sending the certified copy back to VA. The biggest mistake we see is that the veteran sends the completed form back to Janesville, Wisconsin, but this is entirely incorrect and will lengthen the time of payment by VA.

To ensure a timely payment, check page 2, block 23. The VA Regional Office stated is where your form needs to go. If you do not see this block filled out, please then contact your BVA National Service Officer to get you the address of the correct regional office.

One extremely important matter of caution is that you must take possession of the auto and wait some six weeks for VA to make payment. Failing to take possession of the vehicle may result in VA not paying for the vehicle. One other item that must be noted: Do not pay for the vehicle entirely since VA will only pay the seller of the vehicle! If you have any questions, please notify a BVA National Service Officer.

Happy vehicle shopping!

Did You Know?

- For the BVA membership of his era (1946-1971, the period he served as the Association's National Chaplain), Father Thomas J. Carroll was a figure significantly larger than life itself. His sudden passing on April 24, 1971, stirred emotions from blinded veterans and their families throughout the country such that dozens of written tributes poured into the National Headquarters immediately, filling several pages of the May-June 1971 **BVA Bulletin**. A portion of one tribute offered by BVA member Bill Thompson provides a small sampling: "Father Carroll's death left a patch of loneliness in my life which will never leave me. Thoughts of him are intimately bound up with my earliest awkward, painful attempt to come to grips with my blindness. As I think of those shadowy, confusing, anxious days, filled with a mixture of bravado and despair, I know that Father Carroll helped make the difference."



The Greatest Generation Continues to Inspire

by Meredith Buono-DaGrossa

Somewhere at sea, in March of 1945, a young Navy serviceman named James “Jim” Rush was doing what his country asked him to do. He was fighting the generation’s war with strong eyes and a commitment to serve with honor and bravery. Jim would be called back again to serve in Korea. He did not know that later in life, the light would fade from his eyes.

That same month back home in America, a group of about a hundred war-blinded soldiers gathered at a table. They had given their eyesight in that same war (World War II). They could not see the world they had fought to protect, but they had a vision for the future. They could see that others would come home from the war like them and would need to learn how to live again in a sighted world.

Their mission was simple, but profound — to create an organization that would provide support and resources for peer veterans and their families coping with sight loss. Today, 81 years later, that vision remains strong through expert advocacy, engaged membership, and premier programs,

BVA remains committed to ensuring that mission lives on.

Recently, I had the honor of meeting Jim Rush, World War II and Korean War veteran who is now living as a visually impaired veteran. He recently became a BVA member at the age of 99. Yes, it’s true, 99! Last month, Jim completed blind rehabilitation at the Gulf Coast VA BRC and now, eight decades later, is taking on the initiative and

challenge to learn a new way of living. I remain inspired by Jim and his resilience and willingness to learn new things. I am also aware that to connect with those from “The Greatest Generation” is an exceptional experience as we are now living in the final pages of that chapter.

Jim knew nothing of BVA’s establishment on March 28, 1945. He also knew nothing of its founding members, nor did the founders know anything about him. Were those founding members here today, think of their astonishment perhaps at seeing the organization still standing tall and continuing to make life better for veterans like Jim even 81 years later.

As the National Development Director, my job is to secure funds to ensure that every blind and low vision veteran we serve is afforded the opportunity to benefit from the programs and services BVA provides. Expansion of Team BVA, our adaptive sports and Whole Health rehabilitation initiative, and our Ambassador and Veterans Service Programs rely upon the generosity of the community.

Recently, I introduced the BVA Visionary Challenge to invite those who have the means to contribute monthly to consider doing so. The impact this challenge has on our Association can have a ripple effect and demonstrates an engaged membership and the opportunity to support your peer veterans. This challenge mirrors the very same mission to which the hundred war-blinded soldiers committed nearly 81 years ago. It is my duty to continue to fulfill that mission.

Of Note

Survivors' Benefits to Now Be Delivered More Promptly

VA announced a new regulation earlier this year that will lead to speedier decisions and quicker payments for various types of survivors' claims. Previously, VA was required to address separately the claims for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) and Survivors Pension. The process often resulted in a long wait as a formal decision was required for both benefits.

Effective February 23, VA will pay the higher of the two benefits, which is most often the DIC benefits—without delaying the process to develop the lesser benefit. A VA press advisory dated February 13 provides additional information at <https://news.va.gov/press-room/va-moves-to-speed-delivery-of-survivors-benefits/>.

Unprecedented VA Healthcare Infrastructure Improvements Underway

VA has announced that the Department will spend \$4.8 billion during Fiscal Year 2026 to moderate, repair, and improve health care facilities across the country. The upgrades are part of the Non-Recurring Maintenance (NRM) program of VHA.

NRM makes infrastructure improvements to healthcare facilities to ensure safe and effective patient care. This year's NRM investment is the largest single-year investment in VA's history. A breakdown of the funding for specific project categories, accompanied by the criteria for receiving NRM program funds, are provided in the

January 28 VA press advisory at <https://news.va.gov/press-room/144652/>.

Waymo Ready to Ride: Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, Orlando

BVA's Corporate Partner Waymo announced recently their accelerated growth, welcoming the first public riders into its fully autonomous ride-hailing service in four new cities: Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, and Orlando. This brings their total commercial metro areas to ten, resulting in more accessible service available to our blind and low vision veterans.

In addition to marking the first time Waymo has begun service in multiple cities simultaneously, the total number of commercial metro areas served is now ten. The expansion also reflects Waymo's commitment within the states of Texas and Florida.



Select riders from the tens of thousands in these cities who have downloaded the Waymo mobile application received an invitation to take their first local rides on February 23. The company has invited new riders on a rolling basis to ensure a seamless experience across its initial service areas, as it meaningfully scales its operations ahead of opening service to everyone later this year.

Waymo is the only company successfully operating a commercial fully autonomous ride-hailing service at scale in multiple complex urban environments, and they are ramping up with these new expansions. They continue to follow their market entry playbook, always leading with safety, and plan to continue to engage the community to earn trust and generate excitement to ride.

“Waymo is serving more riders than ever, as we are on track to serve over a million rides per week by the end of this year,” said Tekedra Mawakana, co-CEO of Waymo.

“Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, and Orlando are critical to our plans, as we lay groundwork for service in 20-plus cities,” she continued. “Each community has its own unique charm and transportation needs, and we’re eager to provide a safe, reliable, and magical way for locals and visitors to travel.”

Bestwork Industries Boasts Long History

Bestwork Industries for the Blind located in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, is seeking to hire veterans who are blind or visually impaired. Founded in 1981 by Jim Varsaci, a World War II veteran and BVA member who lost his sight in battle, Bestwork is now the largest employer for people who are blind in the state of New Jersey. The organization seeks to

engage, empower, and employ veterans.

Full-time and part-time employment opportunities are available in the following areas: kitting, packaging, document scanning and imaging, and sewing. Bestwork is a competitive, integrated environment, offering industry wages and opportunities for upward mobility.

To learn more about employment opportunities and how to apply, contact Shannon Brown at sbrown@bestworkindustries.org or 856-424-2510, extension 213. More information is available on the organization’s website, accessible by visiting <https://bestworkindustries.org>.

“SQUARES” Web App Provides Needed Veteran Eligibility Info

The Veteran Status Query and Response Exchange System (SQUARES) is a VA web application that provides VA employees and external organizations such as homeless service community partners, law enforcement partners (police departments, sheriff departments, courts, and jails), and local, state, and federal agencies with reliable, detailed information about veteran eligibility for services.

Users submit identity attributes for homeless individuals (name, date of birth, Social Security number, gender) and SQUARES will return information regarding veterans’ status and eligibility for healthcare and a list of specific services such as veterans’ verification, homeless programs, suicide prevention, and legal services.

SQUARES was deployed to production in March 2018. To access a video overview of how SQUARES is making a major impact within the veteran community, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFBV-FuctXY>.

CHAMPVA Gives Needed Help to Veterans' Beneficiaries

VA's Civilian Health and Medical Program, known by the acronym CHAMPVA, is a healthcare benefits plan for veterans' beneficiaries (spouse, surviving spouse, and under age 18 dependents or those over 18 years of age and in school) who meet certain criteria.

CHAMPVA shares the cost of healthcare services and supplies such as:

- Ambulatory surgery
- Durable medical equipment
- Family planning/maternity
- Inpatient/outpatient services, mental health services, preventative, specialist and primary care visits, pharmacy, skilled nursing care, and organ transplants

Generally, no referrals or authorizations are needed prior to care, the only exceptions being dental services and bone marrow transplants.

To be eligible for CHAMPVA, one of the following must be true:

- Spouse or dependent child of a veteran who has been rated permanently and totally disabled from a service-connected disability.
- Surviving spouse or dependent child of a veteran who died from a service-connected disability.
- Surviving spouse or dependent child of a veteran who was, at the time of their death, rated permanently and totally disabled from a service-connected disability.

Veterans' family members who qualify for TRICARE are not eligible for CHAMPVA.



Additional information and resources about CHAMPVA benefits, how to apply for benefits, supporting documents needed for an application, what happens after submitting an application, filing a claim if the provider does not do so, updating other health insurance information after enrolling, and how to contact VA with additional questions are all provided at <https://www.va.gov/family-and-caregiver-benefits/health-and-disability/champva/>.

AI Technology Quietly in Background, Provider Focuses on Veteran

A new Artificial Intelligence voice tool called "Ambient AI Scribe" is now being piloted at ten VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) in every region of the country. The innovation allows the healthcare professional to talk freely and otherwise connect with the patient veteran without having to take notes by hand or on a computer.

With the veteran's permission, Ambient AI Scribe works quietly in the background, generating progress notes from the clinic visit and processing the significance of the conversations. Learn more about the breakthrough technology that could further revolutionize future VA health care visits at <https://news.va.gov/143486/powered-by-ai-improving-veteran-care-experience/>. Included on the webpage is a list of the ten VAMCs currently testing it.

In Remembrance

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

Arkansas R.G.

Robert Earnhart

Carolina R.G.

Ira Bryant

Charles Register R.G.

Humbert Martinez

Florida R.G.

Abraham Beer

James Britton

Carl Coleman

Henry Koffler

Casimir Kowrach

Gem State R.G.

David Browne

Heartland R.G.

Chandler Tyrrell

Illinois R.G.

Michael Joyce

Dixon Montgomery

Louisiana/Mississippi R.G.

Howard Brentlinger

Kenneth Peters

James Tillman

Micigan R.G.

David Lawrence

Mid-Atlantic R.G.

Elaine Musick

New Jersey R.G.

Mustafaa Shabazz

New Mexico R.G.

Roger Conley

New York R.G.

Clearest Braggs

Pennsylvania R.G.

Cornelius Appleby

Joseph Wagner

R.I. and SE Massachusetts

Robert Munger

South Texas R.G.

George Kauanami

Spokane Inland Empire R.G.

Aaron Davaz

Tennessee R.G.

James Bone

Washington R.G.

Jane Adamson

Gerard Brown

Lawrence Davis

Keith Gibson

Harold Marcus

Edward Stein

Charlie Tank

Herbert C. Tollefson

Lawrence Tomovick

Robert Viens

Eugene Wangler

Eddie Wells

George White

Charles Wood

At-Large BVA Members, No Regional Group Affiliation

Thomas Akers (AZ)

Charles Allen (CA)

Willena Allen (KY)

Timothy Miller (MA)

Karl Moser (MI)

James Murphy (CO)

Leburn Palmer (TX)

Napoleon Pietryka (VT)

John Quagliano (NC)

Marcus Rees (CO)

Andrew Reina (MA)

Jesse Roth (TX)

Muncie Shortridge (OR)

John Slaney (MA)

Arthur Smith (MA)

Billy Stanley (GA)

John Sudduth (MA)

Tim Svoboda (MN)

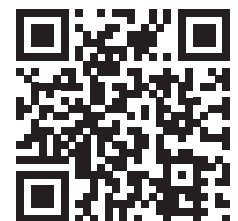
Cynthia Taylor (AZ)

Armstead Walters (AZ)

Kenneth Woods (CA)

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.



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Final Thought

In the organization's role as an advocate for blind and low vision veterans, BVA continually seeks the support of legislators in enacting policies that will help veterans enjoy a better and more productive quality of life. This occurs on the state and local levels but more frequently on the national stage in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, each of which has a Committee on Veterans Affairs to focus on issues specific to our Nation's veterans.

BVA's Congressional Charter, granted in 1958, designates the Association as the official voice of blind and low vision veterans before Congress. This unique designation offers BVA the privilege of appearing in person on an annual basis to summarize verbally the Association's current legislative priorities. A written document, more detailed, is also submitted for the Congressional Record.

Pictured here, Lea Rowe and Fleet Reserve Association National President Richard Fetro enjoyed a lighter moment once the March 3 testimony hearing reached a conclusion. Also testifying as a panel were representatives from Student Veterans of America, Jewish War Veterans, Minority Veterans of America, National Association of County Veterans Service Officers, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

